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Commodification of play in the mundane circle

A study of the political-economic use of housing in the
MMORPG Wildstar

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Abstract:

This thesis aims to research the political-economic aspects of a housing feature in a new MMORPG called *Wildstar*. By discussing social game design principles and the affordances, design and appropriation of *Wildstar*'s housing feature through game analyses, it becomes clear how certain design choices in *Wildstar* try to utilize the same psychological exploits as social games. By connecting these exploits to a theoretical concept called 'the mundane circle', a space for the unremarkable and routine, it becomes evident how *Wildstar* uses the players' social needs to keep them bound to the game, and thereby retained as subscribers.

Keywords: housing, design, appropriation, commodification, mundane circle

Content

Introduction.....	2
Political economy, research question and methods	5
Overview of the forthcoming chapters	7
1. Theoretical framework: Social game design principles	9
1.1 Types of commodification of play	12
2. Analysis: The affordances and design of <i>Wildstar</i>	14
2.1 The matter of game design.....	17
2.2 The value of sociability	21
3. Analysis: Appropriation in <i>Wildstar</i>	23
4. Reflection.....	28
Conclusion.....	31
Bibliography.....	34

Introduction

A deciding moment takes place at the end of a month for a player with a *pay-to-play* (P2P) subscription of a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). Will the player pay for another month, which is required to play, or is it time to cancel the subscription? If the MMORPG companies involved (developer and publisher) want to earn revenue from the players in exchange for game time, it can be safely assumed that they want to keep the player engaged with the game. Research on more popular MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), shows that player engagement can be stimulated through a game's design, for example by constructing a game with a deferral and repetition mechanism (Rettberg 2008). This means that a game 'has no end; it is an endless deferral of an end' and offers content which can be repeated by the players (Rettberg 2008, p.176). As a reward, players can acquire items which are difficult to obtain, which keeps them evermore occupied (and a subscriber). However, the game design of more recent MMORPGs shows parallels with game design of *social games* such as *Farmville* (published by Zynga in 2009), which is played on the social network platform *Facebook*. While *Farmville* is of a different genre (leaning towards simulation based gameplay), it does utilize the deferral and repetition mechanism in the form of new objectives and new items to collect. In *Farmville*, the player is offered a private space which is customizable and where in-game money can be spent in order to upgrade facilities and receive bonuses. The deferral and repetition function continuously challenges the player to obtain new and better items, which might take a considerable amount of the player's time to complete. The game design of *Farmville* allows players to circumvent the time investment by directly buying the more desirable items. Most of these *free-to-play* (F2P) games like *Farmville* thrive on either a great deal of time investment by the player, or purchases of in-game items (Consalvo 2011, Deterding 2010). It is interesting that a subscription based P2P MMORPG seems to integrate similar game design principles from social games, considering that social games and MMORPGs have different business models (P2P versus F2P). What could these use social game design principles mean for P2P MMORPGs?

In a quick search on *Google Scholar* and the digital library of *Utrecht University*, there seem to be no corresponding articles about such developments going on in the design of the MMORPG genre. The articles either focus on player behavior, technical features of network related techniques or just purely design of separate components. What about the changing design of MMORPGs in relation to the players? What are the consequences for the relation between the developer and players if the players are given more freedom in customization of a space in an MMORPG? Is that freedom controlled by the developer, if so, in what way?

There is a lack of research on the creative relations between the developer and the player. This thesis will combine research of the MMORPG design with the practical insight of playing an MMORPG itself and analyzing the players' usage of design. This combination will highlight certain dynamics between design and players which cannot be explained by studying them one at a time or separately (which will be further explained in the section of methods).

A relevant example of a recent P2P MMORPG, which shows design changes and which has integrated social game design principles, is *Wildstar* (Carbine Studios, 2014). In *Wildstar*, the housing feature gives players their own customizable spaces, where the player owns a house and can decorate it with items. While this feature is not new in the MMORPG landscape, housing in *Wildstar* offers extra layers of rewards for the players so that they will spend time in their customizable space - the player's daily return in *Wildstar* is rewarded with bonuses. The daily activities in this space demand time, something that is valuable considering that players pay for a month of game time. The design of *Wildstar* stimulates the player to return daily in order to maintain their housing space. Moreover, the design illustrates how the housing feature stimulates certain player behavior which can be deployed by the developer to create an artificial domestic environment for daily retreat. That is where the housing design in an MMORPG such as *Wildstar* intersects with social game design as seen in, for example, *Farmville*. In both, the creation of a personal space, filled with activities and rewards, is used to keep the player engaged and motivated. The daily return of the player to the game and the completion of everyday tasks can be seen as part of what game researcher, Joshua Zimmerman calls the 'mundane circle': 'a place where the fantastical world is pushed back and room is made for the unremarkable and routine [...] where the mundane itself becomes a part of play' (Zimmerman 2010, p.237). The creation of the term originates from 'the magic circle', originally introduced by classic game theorist, Johan Huizinga in 1938. The magic circle is a bounded space, which is set apart from the regular daily life and offers room for playful activities (Huizinga, 1938). The boundaries of such a playful space remain rather abstract. For Zimmerman, the magic circle is a visual device, which serves as an 'arbitrary demarcation that defines the movement of the everyday into, through, and out of game space' (2010, p.238). He argues that the online virtual world is the space of play itself. The computer of the player is merely a conduit to connect to the online virtual world, thereby rejecting Huizinga's idea of a physical space in which the magic circle has to take place. Within that virtual world is a space which Zimmerman refers to as the mundane circle, a space for the everyday and routine. In this thesis, the mundane circle is used to help indicate and illustrate the routine activities of housing to draw comparisons with social game design principles.

If players don't want to spend time on gathering gold to buy housing items, *Wildstar* offers a monetization option to circumvent time consuming activities. This monetization option is called C.R.E.D.D. (*Certified Research Exploration Destruction and Development*) and makes game time an actual tradable good. This allows the player to buy game time with in-game gold. Players who spend a great deal of time in the game can accumulate more in-game money (gold) than players who invest less time. Assuming that a player has a large amount of free time, the subscription model can go from a *pay-to-play* type to a *play-to-pay* type, considering that the player can buy C.R.E.D.D. in exchange for gold. To understand the context of a system like C.R.E.D.D., it is important to look at the timeframe in which *Wildstar's* revenue model was created. With the game's release in 2014, there has been time in the development cycle to observe what other MMO (massively multiplayer online) games have done and if their business model has been successful. As a game design producer for Carbine Studios, Stephen Frost, mentioned in an interview:

[...] we love MMOs and people on the team who worked on World of Warcraft, Warhammer Online, and City of Heroes ... love the MMO as a company. And that is why we have an obligation also to find those aspects of MMOs that we do not like and try to offer something innovative or improved. (developer interview from *MMOVIPS.com*, 2013)

The years of development took place in a time when MMO games had already proven that revenues could not only be generated through subscriptions, but also by in-game purchases (which are used in both F2P games and social games). This does not apply to, for example, *World of Warcraft* (released in 2004), which was in development when MMORPGs were not yet generating the amount of revenues as they are ten years later. This means that the developer of *Wildstar* has had the opportunity to consider alternative methods to earn revenue apart from the monthly subscription. Even more importantly, the developer has been able to monitor feedback on discussion threads from players of other MMO games in order to invent a new system which aims to suit everyone's needs. The housing feature stimulates a need for and sale of C.R.E.D.D., which means that players can commodify their own play.¹ According to game researcher Olli Sotamaa, commodification of play is 'where the objects and interactions linked with playing and games are effectively commoditized into saleable goods and services' (Sotamaa 2007). The commodification of play in Sotamaa's research places the emphasis on player production of modifications in games, thereby revitalizing or

¹ Items in housing cost gold, which the player might not have (or not enough). Players can also obtain gold through housing, by gathering daily materials and selling them. However, the extra income from housing is not substantial on a daily basis. On a monthly basis, it can fill up about fifteen to twenty percent of what is needed for C.R.E.D.D., depending on its value. Every server has a different supply and demand, which is why the value of C.R.E.D.D. fluctuates. On the website *Reddit*, a member named Ilmor opened a thread which shows how the value of C.R.E.D.D. differs per server. It can lead up to a difference of a hundred percent between servers.

adding value to a certain game. This is also true for *Wildstar* where unique and exciting housing spaces, which are made by players, can offer hours of extra content for other players. The discussion of such forms of commodification is part of the political-economic angle of this thesis, which will be explained in the next section.

Political economy, research question and methods

When taking C.R.E.D.D. and the housing feature into consideration, it seems that the developer of *Wildstar* deploys multiple strategies to retain players as subscribers. In this thesis, I will research those strategies and they will be considered from a political-economic angle. According to Aphra Kerr, 'political economists often identify the location, use (and in some cases abuse) of power by companies at various stages in the production cycle' (Kerr 2006, p.2). In addition, political-economic research of media is concerned 'not just with production, but also with the interaction between production, finance, distribution and retail' (Kerr 2006, p.6). For this thesis, this means that the political-economic angle will allow to identify power relations within *Wildstar* itself and research how the game's housing feature can be used by the developer to increase or sustain revenue. The political-economic angle of studying *Wildstar*'s housing feature leads to the main research question of this thesis:

How is the housing feature in *Wildstar* used by the developer to bind players to the game, thereby retaining them as subscribers?

To answer the main research question, I will explain how the housing feature stimulates certain player behavior and how it tries to retain the player as subscriber. Researching how this stimulation happens, requires an intensive study of the game as both a player and researcher. As game researcher Aarseth argues, to study a game and to understand how players behave, the researcher has to become submerged in the game as a player (Aarseth 2003, p.3). This particular kind of research relies on personal playing sessions and interactions with other players. The playing sessions took place from its launch on 3 June 2014 to 3 August 2014 and from 5 October to 5 November 2014, with an average of ten hours per week. As an MMORPG player, with about ten years of experience in this genre, it was easier for me to delve deeply into the game. According to game researcher José Zagal, prior videogame experience enhances 'the ability to explain, discuss, describe, frame, situate, interpret, and/or position games (2010, p.8). In this thesis, such an ability will help with the analysis of *Wildstar*'s housing feature, which will be used to deduct information from the game. To analyze the housing feature, I will conduct a *structural game analysis*. As game researcher Frans Mäyrä describes, the structural game analysis pays 'special attention to how game rules and interactions with game objects and other players are structured' (Mäyrä

2008, p.165). Such a structural game analysis in this thesis will focus primarily on *Wildstar's* housing feature and study the game dynamics of this feature, its representation in the fictional world (thereby suggesting a certain use) and how social interaction benefits the player through design. The study of these components will identify social game design principles and signs of the mundane circle. The second chapter will offer a more elaborate description of these components.

In addition to the structural game analysis, this thesis will study the interaction between players and their use of the housing feature through *participatory observation*. Such a study through observation is necessary to gain insight about how the design of the housing feature is used by players. This insight can be fruitful to further discuss the use of creative freedom by the players and how this may eventually profit the developer. Submerging in the game as a player and using it as a method to obtain information can be seen as a form of ethnographic research. Playing an online multiplayer game itself offers 'a powerful way to connect to the community' (Taylor 2006, p.8). Understanding the community, exploring the housing feature and observing other players' actions yields insightful information about how players approach the housing feature.² However, there are risks with being a participant observer. These are explained by game researcher René Glas when he borrows the term of 'going native' from anthropology to describe his research (Glas 2013, p.12). What applies to Glas is also applicable to this thesis, which is that '[t]he risk of going native is always to lose critical distance' (Glas 2013, p.13). This need not be a problem, according to Glas, as a researcher is taught to write with a certain critical distance. This means that 'the dual position of being close to as well as distanced from the object of study can be considered highly beneficial to studying games' (Glas 2013, p.13). My approach will be to keep critical distance while at the same time offering insight in *Wildstar's* housing feature.

In this research, I argue that the housing feature in *Wildstar* commodifies Zimmerman's mundane circle through integrating social game design principles in order to bind players to the game and generate more profit from subscriptions or C.R.E.D.D. To substantiate my claim, I have extracted information from my personal playing sessions and my own analysis of the game as a participant observant. According to Fernández-Vara, '[u]sing one's own experience and know-how can be the method to provide insight into how we understand and engage with videogames, with the possibility of providing the kind of nuanced breakdown a close reading allows' (Fernández-Vara 2014, p.211). This means that personal experiences with the housing feature were used as examples to illustrate how commodification of play in the mundane circle occurs. However, as there are many ways to play a game, especially with MMORPGs, this research is not definitive and does not present results which will apply to

² With community, I refer to the players actually using the housing feature in *Wildstar*.

every *Wildstar* player. Instead, this thesis aims to be critical about *Wildstar*'s housing feature, which seems to provide freedom for creativity, but which also benefits the developer. The tension between the freedom of creativity and the developer profiting from that (artificial) freedom is interesting to study, because it may seem as smart and creative marketing in the MMORPG genre, but also as an exploit of user participation. The next section will offer an overview of the chapters in this thesis which function as a structure for my arguments.

Overview of the forthcoming chapters

In the first chapter, I will provide basic knowledge of social games and their mention in academic debates. The knowledge will focus on the exploit of certain psychological principles, which can be explained with the help of a social game studies workshop (from 2010), co-authored by a number of game researchers, and various academic articles (Consalvo 2011, Järvinen 2010).³ By determining the characteristics of social games, I have identified elements which can (or cannot) be translated to the MMORPG genre. The research on social games is combined with research concerning player motivation in MMORPGs (Duchenaud et al. 2006). This combination serves as a foundation for the discussion on the concept of the mundane circle, as it is enforced by the psychological exploits at work in social games (Zimmerman 2010). In addition, by using the research of Mirko Schäfer on media technology, I aim to analyze the *affordances*, *design* and *appropriation* of housing (Schäfer 2011, p.19). Schäfer explains that an affordance 'describes two characteristics, the material aspects, or the specificity of an object or a technology, and the affordance imposed on it through the design' (Schäfer 2011, p.19). In addition, design 'creates its own affordances but is also subject to the affordances of the materials utilized' (Schäfer 2011, p.19). Both affordances and design are closely intertwined. The last term, appropriation, is the 'response to material aspects and design' (Schäfer 2011, p.20). In case of *Wildstar*, appropriation is the response of players to the game's design and its housing feature. Several players have built the most impressive housing spaces, but have also managed to use their housing spaces in a way which doesn't correspond with a house at all (which will be shown and discussed in the third chapter).

While originally intended for research about larger social phenomena on the Internet, the three approaches can be useful to explain certain choices of the developer. What kind of actions are stimulated through design? What is afforded to the players and how do the players appropriate the affordances in the design? These questions will be answered in chapters two and three. However, the layer underneath those actions, the choice of the developers to design a game to keep players subscribed, is where the political-economic

³ Such as Staffan Björk, Sebastian Deterding, Aki Järvinen, Ben Kirman, Julian Kücklich and Janne Paavilainen

tension can be identified. The political-economic aspect will be elaborated by using Schäfer's notion of *explicit* and *implicit participatory culture* (2011). This will be done in combination with the term 'playbour' (a combination of 'play' and 'labour') by game researcher Julian Kücklich (2005) to highlight how user participation can be exploited by a developer. The explicit participatory culture refers to the 'deliberate and conscious appropriation of products' and implicit participatory culture refers to 'user activities [which] are embedded into the software design of web applications benefiting from what users do with those platforms' (Schäfer 2011, p.12). In the case of *Wildstar*, players are given customization tools for their housing spaces. These tools, where players can be seen as user participants, are regulated through the in-game tools that are built into the software of the game. Schäfer also describes this in his research, where the implementation of user participation technologies 'literally means implementing user activities in the software design of an application and employing user participation for commercial purposes often without acknowledging their labour' (Schäfer 2011, p.146). In particular, the employment of user participation for commercial purposes is one of the key arguments in this thesis, as that is where the political-economic tension lies.

The second chapter will offer an analysis of the affordances and design. For example, in *Wildstar*, the developer gives the player a simple interface for the customization of the space in the housing area. As researcher Olli Sotamaa illustrates with the game *Little Big Planet* (MediaMolecule, 2010), a simple interface allows the player to customize in-game spaces without having to learn any complex coding software (2010). This 'promotes creativity and sociability in a compelling way' (Sotamaa 2010, p. 3). However, by looking at design, it is clear that the housing space is designed with limitations in order to contain player activities, as the players are not able to use housing modification tools to change certain buildings outside the space. Affordances and design will expose game dynamics which are relevant when considering player behavior. As Fernández-Vara explains:

The strategies that players deploy while playing the game can be part of the formal study of games; what is more interesting to study the resulting player strategies that may not have been anticipated by the designers, and the novel ways in which players decide to play (Fernández-Vara 2014, p.151)

However, discussing the affordances and design will be done first in order to understand how players are stimulated to create their own environments and how this results in new player strategies.

In the third chapter, these player strategies will be assessed by studying players' appropriation of *Wildstar's* housing. Schäfer's approach of appropriation adds players to the discussion who transform the use of a technology which was not originally intended by the developer (as Fernández-Vara also notes in the quote above). The users are 'adapting and

sometimes transforming its original design' (Schäfer 2011, p.19). As a player and researcher of the game, I have seen unique housing spaces and the various ways that players approach the option to customize their space. Some of them comply with the rules while others change the original purpose of housing (though they do not necessarily break the rules by doing so).⁴ This is of interest, as the ability to alter uses of the housing feature is an illustration of the player's freedom to experiment in a 'sandbox' environment. This is an additional theoretical concept to explain player strategies which can be best described by the work of Wolfgang Iser and his notions of play. Iser offers the idea of 'instrumental play' and 'free play' (1993) which can indicate the behavior of a player within a world which has its own set of rules. However, these two forms of play aren't two fixed points (a player being either instrumental or free), but rather a spectrum (Iser 1993). Researching these styles of play in the housing feature will illustrate how players use their own private space and how the styles are always beneficial for the developer. In what way these benefits exist will be explained by discussing Schäfer's notion of explicit and implicit participatory culture in chapter four.

The last part of this thesis will offer a reflection on the results of the analysis in chapter two and three. *Wildstar* seems to be designed to offer players freedom within their own space, while it also offers ways for the developer to generate revenue and add extra value to the game. By both stimulating the need for gold through the housing feature (especially for free play enthusiasts), and also providing the option to obtain gold in housing on a daily basis (characteristic of instrumental play), the developer creates a similar time/reward design as seen in social games, deployable for multiple players' strategies. However, how strong are the similarities with social game design? Players in *Wildstar* are not able to buy items in the game directly with credit card or other payment methods as seen in social games. Moreover, *Wildstar* as a P2P MMORPG is not as accessible as a freemium social game where people merely have to connect to a social media platform to play. The answers on these reflexive questions lead to the conclusion, where the main research question will be answered. In addition, the conclusion will highlight several remaining discussion points and recommendations for future research.

1. Theoretical framework: Social game design principles

In order to study social game design principles in relation to *Wildstar's* housing feature, it is necessary to understand social games and their respective economic contexts as they illustrate commodification factors. In the last few years, with the rise of social networking

⁴ As a player, there aren't any explicitly stated strict rules in housing, which is why it remains unknown if players break rules of player housing and if it is even possible.

sites, there has been an increase in the amount of players of social games.⁵ Because such games are becoming omnipresent on various social platforms such as Facebook, these games have commanded the attention of game researchers. In the workshop report concerning social game design, as well as in various academic papers, journal articles and books, the 'social game' as a term has led to debate in the academic arena about whether it is actually social or not (Deterding 2010). Aki Järvinen argues in an article on *Gamasutra.com* that social games are social on a superficial level, which is not necessarily a critique, as players of social games are content with that level of interaction (2010). However, Suen de Andrade e Silva highlights a deeper social engagement among players in her research (2013). She illustrates how players use the social network platform on which the game is played, to form groups for support, thereby become acquainted with new people (Andrade e Silva 2013). On the level of game design, there seems to be a general agreement, which proves to be useful when drawing comparisons with other game genres. As game and communication researcher Mia Consalvo describes in her article about social mechanics:

Social games typically feature a single player component, coupled with basic forms of multiplayer interaction embedded in the design. Thus, a player could ostensibly enjoy a social game even if she had no friends playing it, but her progress would generally be difficult and her overall experience much less enjoyable than if friends and family were also playing along. (Consalvo 2011, p.189)

The description of a single-player component in a multiplayer environment ties in with the argument of researchers Duchenaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore and their focus on player motivation in *World of Warcraft*. Various social studies on MMORPGs will demonstrate that, when asked about the reason for playing such games, 'most players mention "the social factor": it is the presence of other people in these games' worlds that sets them apart' (Duchenaute et al. 2006, p.7). However, in their research, Duchenaute et al. argue that a large group of players indicates a different sort of 'social factor'. It is not necessarily about grouping or direct support, but the presence of other players 'also provide[s] an audience, a sense of social presence, and a spectacle' (Duchenaute et al. 2006, p.7). The audience, in this case, consists of other players. As Duchenaute et al. describe, audience is important because players want to, for example, showcase their latest acquired items - 'without an audience of other players to whom these items could be displayed, the game would make little sense' (2006, p.7). In addition, the audience and interaction with other players reinforce the sense of social presence. Interaction with other players does not need to be immediate visible communication, but players can also use the in-game chat to give the player an

⁵ The company Facebook announced (at the *Game Developers Conference* of 2014) that 375 million people play games connected to Facebook (according to a press article written by Vishu Gupta on the developers platform of Facebook).

impression of other people playing the game (Duchenaud et al. 2006). When players have immediate visible communication from avatar to avatar, there is a chance of spectacle, as random events are results of pure social interaction between players. These encounters with other players can be humorous and, according to Duchenaud et al., 'greatly contributes to the social atmosphere of a game' (2006, p.8). These three factors have been studied in MMORPGs, but also exist in social games. The game *Farmville* offers a social presence by having neighbors, people playing in the world that the player inhabits. For example, *Farmville* uses the social media platform *Facebook* to spread messages about achievements or new buildings/tools on the farm to the friends of the *Farmville* player. This is a way to share achievements to people on the social network as well as to in-game neighbors (the neighbors can see the farm by clicking on it).

A similarity of both *Farmville* and *Wildstar* is the daily goal and rewards given to players in order to occupy them on a daily basis. Just as 'having a farm' in *Farmville*, the housing space in *Wildstar* uses the possession of a 'house' to evoke the feeling of having a home which players can return to on a daily basis. This space of retreat and feeling of 'home' is one of the important observations of Zimmerman in his research of 'the mundane circle' (2010). Similar to *Wildstar*, *Everquest 2* (Sony Online Entertainment, 2004) has a housing feature where players can return to a private space. Zimmerman investigates the housing feature in *Everquest 2* and particularly focuses on 'how "the everyday" of the mundane world has been instantiated in the world of *Everquest 2*' (Zimmerman 2010, p.237).

I have spent literally days working on my virtual home. I have also spent hours completing tasks I rarely attempt in my everyday life: cooking, decorating, and even manually paying the mortgage... (Zimmerman 2010, p.237)

As mentioned in the introduction, Zimmerman's notion of the mundane circle functions as an extra space within the magic circle where the unremarkable and routine is considered part of play. For Zimmerman, the discussion of the magic circle allows for critical thought about play and non-play. This opposition can be fruitful as it challenges the perception of the relationship between game and player and the space where play is constituted. Researcher, writer and gamer, Jaakko Stenros has researched the magic circle and its many applications in game- and social studies. Similar to the uncertainty about the social aspect in social games, the magic circle has vague barriers. According to Stenros, '[i]t seems to be a useful, powerful metaphor, though it has not been exactly clear what it is a metaphor for' (2012, p.5). For researchers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (not to be confused with Joshua Zimmerman from the mundane circle), the magic circle is described as 'a closed circle' from which 'the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world' (2004, p.95). This is different for Thomas Malaby, who argues that the magic circle is a social construction where borders are not absolute, but where there is a form of separation between everyday

life and play (2007, p.111). These examples from different authors illustrate how the magic circle as theoretical concept remains unclear in its definition. However, the last example of Malaby highlights the separation, which is exactly where the existence of the mundane circle tries to be proven (2007). While the *magic* circle serves as an indicator for Joshua Zimmerman to decide whether a player steps in and out of a space of play, the *mundane* circle demonstrates how the everyday life is becoming part of play. In the case of *Wildstar*, the maintenance of the player's garden to receive daily rewards might have the same importance as doing the laundry outside the game. As Zimmerman demonstrates with *Everquest 2* and as can be read in the quote at the beginning of this paragraph, the housing feature encourages the player to feel that their private space is just as important as their physical home and requires the same amount of attention. An owner of a house will pay every month to keep their house and, thus the developers of *Wildstar* encourage players to do the same if they want to keep their virtual home in the game. An important aspect of the mundane circle is that, just as *Everquest 2*, *Wildstar* tries to create a virtual space of retreat for the player, where mundane activities, such as gardening, are rewarded. However, it does not stop there. In addition to the space itself, *Wildstar* stimulates social interactions and additional rewards, which can be used by the player as a commodification of play. This will be discussed in the next subchapter.

1.1 Types of commodification of play

In order to remain focused on commodification of play in the spheres of social games and MMORPGs, this subchapter highlights the revenue model of a social game such as *Farmville*. The game tries to earn revenue through play, thereby making the act of playing a commodity. The discussion of the social games in the social game studies workshop report by Deterding questions the commercial design of games such as *Farmville*. Players have to fulfill daily routines to gain rewards and to save up points to buy new and more desirable items. However, these items can also be bought instantly by paying with real world currencies, such as dollars (Deterding 2010).⁶ This is part of the *freemium* model (combination of 'premium' and 'free'), in which 'all "game mechanics" are retention mechanics that gear towards monetization by imposing in-game goals' (Deterding 2010, p.11). For instance, rewards which take a great deal of time to acquire (and can be part of an in-game goal) can also be bought directly with dollars.⁷ An important detail to note in the revenue business model of a social game which uses the freemium model is that time

⁶ From this point forward, dollars will be used to indicate real world currencies in order to make a distinction between in-game money and real world money.

⁷ Buying and selling in-game items outside the game, for example through auction websites like *eBay*, is not allowed according to Blizzard's *End User License Agreement*

becomes a crucial factor for monetization choices. Social games introduce tasks to players which can be frustrating as they are time consuming and monotonous. Those tasks can be avoided through paying dollars directly to obtain certain items, which generates revenue for the game provider (Deterding 2010). As Andrade e Silva states in her research on social games, 'it is not unintentionally that this model often creates an imbalanced relationship between the goals offered by the game and the ability of non-paying players to accomplish them' (2013). The developer offers the player a choice between, for example, playing daily activities for a week in order to acquire a certain item, or pay with dollars to acquire that item instantly. In this freemium model, the act of play itself is being transformed into a commodity directly, where people can pay to circumvent the amount of time that is needed for an item.

However, how can commodification of play take place in a subscription based MMORPG when it does not use a freemium model? An example of commodification of play in MMORPGs, is *World of Warcraft*, where in-game items are bought and sold for dollars (Kücklich 2004).⁸ The act of playing the game (gathering the items to sell online) is then turned into a commodity to earn dollars or trade for other in-game items. The developer of *Wildstar* created C.R.E.D.D. currency to offer the player, with a great deal of leisure time, a chance to turn spent time into more game time. It also offers the players with less time, but with more money, a way to earn in-game gold. Players who can easily spend money can buy C.R.E.D.D. with dollars and sell it for in-game gold. There is a parallel to be drawn with social games regarding C.R.E.D.D.; when time becomes an actual trading good, then it does not differ much from special in-game items in social games. For example, if a player in *Farmville* wants to build a better greenhouse, it has to acquire enough money through selling food that has to be cultivated over time. Will the player pay a dollar to acquire that greenhouse, or put a great deal of time to acquire enough in-game currency? This same question can be posed to players in *Wildstar* when acquiring in-game gold. If players with less time to play *Wildstar* want to buy an expensive mount, but do not have the in-game gold, they can buy C.R.E.D.D. with real dollars and sell the C.R.E.D.D. to players who have a large amount of gold. Again, time versus dollars becomes part of the game design.

A different, more implicit commodification of play, is the creation of content by players. Through their created content, players 'produce information that can be collected, stored and further utilized by the platform holder' (Sotamaa 2010, p.15). The utilization of the platform holder (the developer of *Wildstar* in this case) is a form of commodification, as it delivers players new content through design. This is similar to Kücklich's argument, 'that the modders' leisure is being commodified by the games industry' (2005).⁹ While housing in

⁸ Selling in-game items for dollars is strictly forbidden in *World of Warcraft*, which means that Blizzard does not support this kind of commodification of play.

⁹ *Modders* are people who modify games.

Wildstar is not exactly the same as modification culture, one might argue that the same development is taking place. Players are given modification tools and when the players succeed in creating unique and exciting spaces, the developer profits from the extra value in their game while other players profit from extra game hours to spend. Kücklich describes these valuable forms of play as *playbour* (2005). The concept of playbour was illustrated previously with the game, *Little Big Planet* through Sotamaa (2010). The conclusion of Sotamaa's research might also apply to *Wildstar*, based on the study of player appropriation. Sotamaa concludes:

For the especially skilled player-developers, the game provides an inviting platform to showcase their talent, earn fame and even potential recruitment. For the majority of players, the level editor is still more of a software toy that allows them to create small-scale experiments and instant social fun. (Sotamaa 2010, p.15)

While *Wildstar*'s housing customization does not require specific skills due to its simplicity, the last part of the citation above, stating that customization is a 'software toy', is exactly how the developer of *Wildstar* can add extra gameplay. It is 'instantaneous social fun' (Sotamaa 2010). This means that if players continue making entertaining housing spaces, they keep on adding instant fun for other players to experience. Examples of such housing spaces are discussed later in this thesis, with the analysis of appropriation in chapter three.

The explanation of the three major parts of the theoretical framework, namely the social game design principles, the mundane circle and the types of commodification of play has highlighted how social games make use of a particular design where players can use dollars to acquire in-game items. In addition, the framework explained how the single-player component in a multiplayer environment is combined with social factors such as an audience and social presence. To extend on these social factors, the discussion of the mundane circle made clear how the concept of a virtual home creates the idea of a private space in an MMORPG. Lastly, the commodification of play provided insight into the need for the developer to invent additional systems such as C.R.E.D.D. to earn revenue. By having discussed these types of commodification of play in the theoretical framework, it will be easier to understand how certain decisions made about the affordances and design of *Wildstar* influence the player's experience, which will be explained in the next chapter.

2. Analysis: The affordances and design of *Wildstar*

This chapter will offer an analysis of the affordances and design of *Wildstar*'s housing feature. To conduct the analysis, I will do a close reading of the housing feature in *Wildstar*. A close reading is an in-depth analysis, which provides 'very specific examples to sustain our

argument, be it explaining a high-level theory, an interpretation, or helping to deliver our personal account and approach to the game' (Fernández-Vara 2014, p.200). The close reading will focus on the structural understanding of *Wildstar's* housing feature, which 'is important for any analysis, since it involves those parts and processes which have strongest influence on people engaged with its actual gameplay' (Mäyrä 2008, p.166). This second chapter will use specific examples to assist the discussion of the gameplay mechanics, the representation of the housing feature in the fictional world and the stimulation of social interaction among players. The reason why these three components will be analyzed is because they expose interesting elements which can be compared to social game design. For example, studying the gameplay mechanics will illustrate how the housing feature uses the same daily routine reward system as seen in social games. In combination with the representation of the housing feature in the fictional world, it will become apparent how the housing area is portrayed as a daily space of retreat. As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter combines affordances and design because they are tightly knit together. To explain the role of affordances, Schäfer refers to Donald Norman and his example of a chair by stating that affordances 'delineate the fundamental properties that determine how an object could be used' (Norman 1998, p.9). For instance, a chair can be made of wood in order to be strong enough to support a person's weight. How that chair is used, depends on design. The definition of design by Schäfer is 'the formalization of anticipated user activities through the use of certain materials or technologies and the shaping of these into artifacts that constitute the designated affordances' (2011, p.20). This chapter will offer a description and analysis of the fundamental properties and the formalization of anticipated user activities to provide insight about the possibilities of *Wildstar's* housing feature for the player.

The housing space itself will be the first object of study when analyzing the affordances of the housing feature. The interesting affordance of the housing space is the customization, because it allows the player a freedom of creation of a private space. Once players buy their house (which will be further discussed with design), players are teleported to their own private space which has customizable features. The private space in *Wildstar's* housing is *instanced*, which means that the player is transported to a different part of the game which is, optionally, restricted for other players. Every player of level fourteen or higher is entitled to have player housing, but the house itself costs one gold coin in the beginning (which is easy to acquire at level fourteen). Upgrading and customizing in housing is done through menus and customization tools. In *Wildstar*, housing is part of a larger goal, which is to achieve the maximum level with a character by doing quests, exploring dungeons (mostly played with multiple players in a group) or raids (multiple players team up to defeat a difficult monster). There are also challenges, such as to 'collect x amount of y' or 'kill x amount of enemies

within a certain time limit'. All these options to progress through the game can be seen as the *core gameplay*. The description of the core gameplay is actually important to keep in mind, as *Wildstar* stimulates the player to reach the maximum level. As will be explained in the design part of the analysis, certain levels are needed to buy greater items or bigger houses in the housing feature. An additional reason why core gameplay is important is because it performs a role opposite to housing. Using Zimmerman's mundane circle, housing is 'a place where the fantastical world is pushed back and room is made for the unremarkable and routine' (Zimmerman 2010, p.237). However, in order to have a space for the unremarkable and routine, there has to be a space for the remarkable and non-routine so that players will seek retreat in the housing area. This is the function of the core gameplay.

As described in the introduction, *Wildstar* allows players without knowledge of complex coding software to customize their own private spaces. The menus and customization tools regulate what the player is able or not able to do. The gameplay experience is not interrupted (no additional or external program) and the game mechanics allow the player to customize their space in a simplistic manner. This is similar to the console game *Little Big Planet* in terms of player production. This game allows 'players to customize the existing levels and to create new levels of their liking', through the 'very same creation mechanism used by the studio's professional designers' (Sotamaa 2010, p.3). Creating a level in *Little Big Planet* becomes part of play itself, but the distribution of levels seems equally important for Sotamaa, as players can upload their creations to let other players play with them (2010). The 'player-designer', as Sotamaa calls it (2010, p.3), is a returning concept, which is discussed in greater detail when studying the design and appropriation of *Wildstar's* housing. *Little Big Planet* uses the *Playstation Network* to save and share all the creations of players and similarly, *Wildstar* does the same through the affordance of the MMORPG, namely the online servers which store and share data. Every change that is made by the player in his/her private space is also communicated with the server of the game, which *Wildstar* uses to host virtual worlds for thousands of players. As already touched upon when discussing the mundane circle, the affordance of online housing, where every action is saved and the space itself is created on a server is important to reinforce the feeling and the association of a real home. When players log out, their housing space does not cease to exist. It is a space they temporarily leave behind, but can continue to live in the next time they log in.

As has been shown through the study of affordances, players have the ability to own and customize a private space in an MMORPG. The affordances of the MMORPG in terms of data being stored on servers, reinforces the housing area as space of retreat, a place which still exists once the player is disengaged with it. However, in what way players can use housing and how their activities are confined, is a matter of design.

2.1 The matter of game design

As touched upon at the beginning of this chapter, the three components of gameplay mechanics, representation and stimulation of social interaction among players will expose interesting elements which are similar to social game design. This second section will start with the representation of the housing feature, which eventually leads to gameplay mechanics (how it works) and the stimulation of social interaction.

The housing feature uses the association of a home by offering a customizable private space. When studying the design of the housing feature in *Wildstar*, it becomes clear how the player is confronted with the option of housing throughout the game and is stimulated to use it. The process of acquiring a house is interwoven with the gameplay as a quest and not treated as a small mention for an extra feature (see figure 1). The player is invited to meet with a broker, the *Protostar Housing Representative*, in the central city of their faction.¹⁰ The quest consists of viewing displays of different houses and visiting a real estate agency, evermore confirming the mundane circle by simulating the purchase of a home. The housing space is explained in-game as a private floating island in the air. Because it is a floating island, players are not able jump outside their private space, as this would mean 'death' in the fictional world.



Figure 1 The quest in the red square and the housing representative in-game (screenshot from personal play session)

When the quest is completed, the player will be transported to the housing area and is confronted with an empty piece of terrain with debris and tools. Once there, the interface

¹⁰ On a side note, the company *Protostar* is a parody of a commercial institution which is also used in the promotional campaign of the game and illustrates the tone of humor.

offers additional buttons above the action buttons to give access to the tools that can be used to fill up the terrain with objects (statues, bushes, etc.) (see figure 2).



Figure 2 The extra buttons in the interface (in the red square) are present to navigate through the tools in player housing (screenshot from personal play session)



Figure 3 Plots in the red square, enhancement in the blue square (screenshot from personal play session)



Figure 4 Advanced options in edit mode of an item (screenshot from personal play session)

The piece of terrain is divided into 'plots' and there is room for 'enhancements' in each one (see the red square figure 3). For example, a plot has room for an enhancement (see the blue square in figure 3), such as a *Mining Tier* to gather ore on a daily basis and increase profession skills, or *Garden Tier* to gather plants. Next to these enhancements there is room for one larger plot, which is the house. Houses can be upgraded to bigger houses, though the player needs to be at least at level thirty or higher, which stimulates the player to also perform quests and level up (hence the relevance of the core gameplay). This also applies to the enhancements. The higher level enhancements will reward the player with better materials. This is done in order for high level players to continue using the housing space for rewards instead of obtaining low level materials which are no longer profitable. In addition to the enhancements, the house itself can be filled with decorative items and pieces of furniture. Once the items are placed, their scale and angles can be customized (see figure 4). These items do not have to be placed in the house, but can also be placed anywhere else on the terrain. In the early stage, it is difficult for the player to purchase all of the items due to the cost. When a player is at level fourteen, there will not be enough gold to fill the housing plots instantly (in order to gain additional experience points or gather crafting materials). This is why players also earn housing items as rewards when they have completed challenges or random events during the course of the core gameplay. Even when players do not use housing, they will receive house related items to stimulate its use by completing challenges

in the core gameplay. These items yield bonuses for the player, creating an additional incentive to use housing and gather objects such as the *FABkits* (abbreviation for fabrication kit).

Gathering objects and completing quests or activities for better items is, as in other MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, a crucial part of the game. This means that *Wildstar* also places 'the emphasis on increasing numerical values throughout the game', which 'in many ways controls the way players think of instrumental progress and success in the game' (Glas 2013, p.61). For example, items can yield bonuses for the player which enhances their strength with a numerical value of '+1' on the item. Players will want to eventually gain rewards which yield a numerical value of '+2' because it is statistically better. There are multiple types of items in the housing feature, each with its own function and possible bonuses. For instance, there are decorative items which yield bonuses such as '*earn extra rest xp*' and will only yield extra rest experience points, but not additional strength, stamina or other character strengthening rewards. Rest experience points are points which are given to the player when he/she is offline. In that way, players who have less time to play the game are rewarded with extra experience points once they start playing again and complete quests. They will stay longer in their 'rest state', which lets players gain ten percent more experience points from quests/challenges/killing NPCs (non-playable characters). This 'has been designed to allow the more casual players to catch up with their more "hardcore" counterparts' (Duchenaud et al. 2006, p.2). An interesting point of discussion considering the design of housing is that players will always be rewarded with housing items throughout their adventure to level up, even though they do not own a house or did not complete the quest at level fourteen. If players want to level up faster, they can use the housing space as logout zone so they gain extra rest experience points. These rewards are interesting because they stimulate the player to return to their housing space after a session and also to begin in their house when starting a new session, thereby reinforcing the mundane circle. Another point of discussion is the fact that the housing space is an additional area where the players are able to not only customize their house and place items, but also use enhancements to gather daily rewards such as ores or plants. This reinforces the feeling of routine of having a house, though not without purpose, as players can gain items and use them to acquire gold (through selling them on the auction house) or to improve skills of certain professions (gathering ores is beneficial for a miner).

This section of the second chapter has given information about the design of *Wildstar*'s housing feature. It particularly explained how the housing feature is represented in the game and how the mechanics stimulate the player's daily return to its housing space. Similar to the social game design, a player is offered a single player component (a private housing space) in a multiplayer environment (MMORPG). The parallel with social games is

not only limited to daily rewards, as daily routine activities are also rewarded as well as a player's social skills, which will be discussed in the next subchapter.

2.2 The value of sociability

In the list of items, from which a player can choose to build objects in their housing space, there are some that can be bought with a special currency called *renown points*. The renown points can be obtained through social interaction with other players and used to buy additional items in the housing area as well as consumables in the core gameplay.¹¹ This means that sociability of the player holds value. Social interaction includes forming groups in the core gameplay, as well as doing dungeons and raids with the guild or a group. For example, during my playing sessions, when I needed to complete a quest where a fight was involved with high level enemies, I asked for other players to help. When I succeeded in forming a group of five players and completed the quests, the players remained within the group and chatted about doing other quests - every completed quest as group rewards renown points which my co-adventurers wanted to spend on their house. In addition to social interaction during core gameplay, the housing feature also allows a player to invite other players, even a whole guild, to enter their private space. There is an option to set the housing space to 'public' or 'private'. Once it is set to public, random players can enter the housing space and take a look (though they are not able to customize it). This is an important choice in design, as public housing spaces enabled my research as a participant observant to study other player strategies where players either unleashed their creativity or show no creativity at all (just the house, no decorative items or overall theme). This is, again, similar to *Little Big Planet*, where levels made by players are used as additional content for other players (Sotamaa 2010). It is important to analyze housing spaces as additional content in *Wildstar* as they highlight the creative relations between the developer and the player. These relations can include 'exploitative and mutually beneficial elements', which will be specifically discussed in chapter four (Sotamaa 2010, p.1). Such a relation can be illustrated with the renown points in *Wildstar*, but is also apparent in social games. In both cases the developer tries to secure online friendship ties through design and those friendship ties can form a reason for players to keep on playing as it invokes the feeling of guilt when quitting the game (leaving friends behind). The creative relation is also mutually beneficial, as the player receives points for being social and the developer profits from having extra players (or retaining them). In addition to these exploitative and mutually beneficial elements, the stimulation of social behavior can also increase the feeling of an audience (showcasing your

¹¹ Consumables are items which players can use to gain health or various bonuses which grant the players an extra boost in experience points.

avatar to other players in the group/guild/raid), the social presence (players playing together in an open world) and spectacle (players cause unpredictable dynamic relations with each other which increases the chance of spontaneous situations). These factors can be important for players to keep on playing an MMORPG.

There are benefits for social interactions with other players, such as the option to become 'neighbors' with other players. This option allows players to profit from each other's resources, including harvesting crafting materials and splitting the loot fifty-fifty, or other percentages which fit the players' preference. Thus, in addition to the additional resting experience points which are accumulated by the players when they are logged off, they can also receive loot rewards if they are neighbors with a player who harvests the daily materials. However, if players do not log in regularly, the enhancements in the housing space will decay (after a week) and will need upkeep (see figure 8 for an example). Other players can maintain their friend's housing enhancements if they are roommates, but that will cost the friend a certain amount of gold to repair the plots.



Figure 5 Example of a garden tier, built on a plot (screenshot from personal play session)

Promoting another player to 'roommate' allows him/her to also decorate the player housing instead of just harvesting and walking around. Terms such as 'neighbor' and 'roommate' are a reinforcement of the mundane circle, where domestic relationships are used to create a feeling of having an actual home. In addition, the objects, such as carpets, couches, paintings on the wall etc. in housing in *Wildstar* adds to the simulation of having a home. This ties in with Zimmerman's mundane circle, in which he argues that housing provides 'players with a refuge of mundanity inside the game world: the mundane circle of player housing' (Zimmerman 2010, p.246). This means that players are invited to simulate the ideals of having a home, completing daily activities and meeting up with in-game friends.

These ideals might correspond with those that people have outside the game, such as having a home, a family to share it with, a job and lovely neighbors. An important parallel with social game design is the reinforcement of emotional attachment of a space or place which has taken time and effort to build or maintain. This could form a reason to keep on playing the game.

After analyzing the design of *Wildstar*'s housing, several points are worth making. First of all, everything in *Wildstar* is designed; it is crafted by a development team which builds options and features with a purpose. The analysis of design focused particularly on the housing feature. However, housing is interwoven with the core gameplay, which means that the designed interactions between the two, including the discussion of items and goals in the game, were part of the analysis. Secondly, through analyzing design, it became clear how daily rewards and extra resting experience points are used to encourage the player to return on a daily basis, which in turn reinforces the mundane circle in the housing space as a place of daily retreat. Lastly, players are rewarded with renown points for their social interactions with other players by becoming neighbors or roommates, but also completing quests in the core gameplay with either a group, or other members of a player's guild. This stimulates players to form a group or join guilds, thereby increasing social interaction. Housing contributes to this social interaction by letting the players buy items for their housing space with renown points. However, even though the design of *Wildstar* encourages the player to use the housing feature for obvious beneficial bonuses, it does not mean that every player is necessarily interested in using it. This optional use is discussed in the next chapter.

3. Analysis: Appropriation in *Wildstar*

As touched upon whilst analyzing the design, the developer integrated the option of setting a housing space to 'public'. This makes it possible for a researcher, an observing participant, to visit those housing spaces and observe how players appropriate the housing feature. This also leads to unique observations from personal playing sessions and to more dynamic results when analyzing appropriation as various spontaneous situations can take place. The reason why I chose the term *appropriation* in Schäfer's research is because it highlights the actions of users who adapt and/or transform a technology (Schäfer 2011). As mentioned in the introduction, appropriation can be seen as the 'response to material aspects and design' (Schäfer 2011, p.20). This is important as not all the players are the same and do not offer the same response - *player A* might adapt or transform a technology and *player B* might not. This chapter relies heavily on my personal gaming sessions and the resulting observations revolving around the housing feature. The risk of results based on a personal account is that

it implies a certain authority, the researcher is portrayed as ‘the ideal player’ (Fernández-Vara 2014, p.212). It is true that certain players might not be interested in visiting other player’s housing spaces or interested in other players at all, which eliminates the possibility of the interactions with other players described in this chapter. However, my personal play sessions focused on the game and its housing feature, as well as some of the players who have used the housing feature in unique ways. As a result, the findings are useful when making the comparison to social games. This research contains results based on playing on a *player-versus-environment* role playing server called *Lightspire*. On this server, it seems that housing is used as space for the purpose of role playing ‘which can be described as taking on the goals and desires of someone else (including fictional characters), and storytelling performed by the players (rather than by the game system)’ (Lundgren & Björk 2012, p.119). In practice, this means that *player A* might play take on the fictional role of a cop and *player B* the role of a bandit to recreate a fictional scenario. In addition to role play situations, there are examples in this chapter based on articles found online, where players have made it their goal to create the most impressive housing space. This chapter will discuss those impressive housing spaces and particularly how the feature of housing can be appropriated according to a player’s style.

Before diving into possible comparisons, there will first be an example of a personal study of appropriation through participatory observation, which yielded interesting results. The personal experience involves a random player I had as a neighbor during my months of play. The player sent an invite to become neighbors and I accepted with an agreement to split the extra harvesting materials fifty-fifty. This meant that if I was offline for multiple days, my neighbor could harvest the daily rewards and I would get half of those rewards. What happened is that, instead of being neighbors for social reasons, the player simply harvested crafting materials from my enhancements. When I started playing again in October, the player stopped being my neighbor. This situation demonstrates how a social option in the game is designed to stimulate social interactions between players, but is not necessarily used for those purposes. Instead, social systems in *Wildstar*’s housing, such as being neighbors, can be exploited to gather more materials (and also aid in obtaining C.R.E.D.D.). The developers of *Wildstar* might stimulate social engagement of the player by designing the neighbors system, but at the same time, that design does not require any social communication between players. Consequently, it is easy for players to simply ignore each other and profit from the daily rewards. As Järvinen noted in social games, the combination of parallel play (being online at the same time) and asynchronicity (only harvesting when the neighbor is offline) ‘effectively prevents shared space, and thus reduces communication modes available to players’ (Järvinen 2010). This illustrates the similarity with social games, where the ‘single player component, coupled with basic forms of multiplayer interaction’ is

'embedded in the design' (Consalvo 2011, p.189).

The multiplicity of player styles, whether a player engages with their neighbor or not, can be illustrated with the concepts instrumental and free play. Instrumental play is more focused on a particular goal while free play has no particular aim and is more for the sake of continuous play with a high degree of improvisation (Iser 1993). With these two forms of play in mind, it is interesting to look at the goals in the housing area, as they can stimulate a certain appropriation by the player. As mentioned in the design chapter, housing can be used to collect decorative items, which yield extra resting experience points as a bonus. In addition, if the player is offline for a day or more, his/her neighbors can harvest a part of the daily gathering materials. This is specifically rewarding when the player is offline for a longer amount of time. With regards to my neighbor, who never engaged with me socially and simply harvested my daily rewards, I found it an interesting case for further investigation. As his or her neighbor (the gender was never known due to a lack of social interaction), I had the ability to visit his or her space. A player has the option to fill the housing space with non-beneficial enhancements, such as statues or ponds. However, my neighbor's space was filled with daily rewarding enhancements and bonus yielding items for rest experience points, clearly indicating instrumental play. In addition to this space, there were other spaces which were set to 'public' which I visited and indicated free play.

In the case of role playing, the player's use of housing seems to shift. There seems to be no focus on items with bonuses, but the housing space seems to be primarily used for building a role playing space. Visiting other players' houses was not difficult as many housing spaces were set to 'public' and, in the zone chat channel, players were invited to a certain housing space to perform a role play. There were also player housing spaces which had their obvious inspirations from movie sets. An example of a movie inspired housing space is featured on an internet website called *Wildstar Wikia* in a special section '*Crib of the Week*'. In it, there is an interview with a player who built a Las Vegas inspired space:

I was watching Vegas Vacation, and during the scene where they are driving down the Strip I just happened to look at a Giant Crowded Grave I had on my plot, and it just hit me to create a Vegas themed plot, with the feel an amusement park. Basically how I feel Vegas would be like, Neon Lights, Gambling, Drinking, just a Good Ol' Time. (Pinkachu - Wildstar Wikia)



Figure 6 Example of the Las Vegas inspired housing space (screenshot from *Crib of the Week*)



Figure 7 Second example of the Las Vegas inspired housing space (screenshot from *Crib of the Week*)

As can be seen in figure 5 and 6, objects are used to imitate a certain place/building/film scenario and the players are invited to role play. The idea of a sandbox and the feeling of freedom is more noticeable in these role playing spaces, as the players have spent a considerable amount of time to build a fantastical world. Alternative uses of housing are also present in *Wildstar*, which are not necessarily used for role play, but for an entirely different experience altogether. For example, a player has made a complete skating park with the building items in the list (see figure 7). There is a *hoverboard* mount which can serve as skateboard and players can all skate around the housing space. The rules are not broken but

it is a different use of the player's housing space. Such an appropriation of housing space options is not entirely surprising as the customization, similar to for example *Little Big Planet*, offers the players the tools to make new buildings (see figure 5 and 6), and allows them to act as 'player-designers' (Sotamaa 2010,p.3). As Sotamaa indicates when describing *Little Big Planet*, 'the players can create new objects from scratch by starting with basic shapes and filling them with a material of their liking' (2010, p.3).



Figure 8 Wildstar's Hoverpark, example of alternative housing use (screenshot from the Youtube video about the skatepark, uploaded by Cerquaful)

The affordances and design, in combination with various forms of appropriation such as the free play with the skate park and instrumental play with my neighbor, illustrated how players in *Wildstar* are invited to create their own unique housing space. In addition, they illustrated how sociability can suit the player's needs for instrumental or free play. After analyzing the appropriation, it is evident that the responses of players, including the creation of a skate park, are still beneficial for the developer. The unexpected use of housing by players remains a form of additional new content without the developers having to deliver that content themselves.

When focusing on the appropriation of social interaction systems such as the renown points, interesting situations arise. For example, as discussed in the second chapter, neighbors can harvest each other's materials if one of the two is offline for a day or more. In my play sessions, my neighbor only harvested from *my* housing space since I never took the time to harvest his/her daily rewards. When the play session ended in August 2014, my housing space was not maintained and it did not offer my neighbor any rewards. This might not have pleased the player, as he/she was no longer my neighbor when I returned to play in October 2014. The interaction with my neighbor is a typical example of similar design

components in social games as 'social game developers have promoted asynchronous communication as the dominant form of social exchanges in their games' (Järvinen 2010). Once a player in *Wildstar* is offline for a day, the neighbor can harvest the daily rewards without social interaction. This can be compared to a family that goes on vacation and asks their neighbors, who they might never socialize with, to water the plants in the garden. The ideals and recreation of having a home ties in with the three factors by Duchenaut et al. (2006): the audience, social presence and spectacle. Audience refers to other players who can have access to your space, such as neighbors, roommates or random players when the housing space is set to 'public'. Social presence, which is represented by the mention of neighbors, creates the sense of other people playing the game. In addition, social presence is also felt through the players' housing spaces without other players having to be online at the same time. These spaces are handcrafted by players and at the same time confirm the presence of other players playing the game. Lastly, spectacle might happen when multiple players are present in a public housing space and create spontaneous situations. For example, during my sessions, I witnessed people being invited to a certain housing space where they were sitting and dancing around a campfire, talking with one another. Some of those players were engaged in fictional character role play, and some of the players were discussing quests and raid bosses within *Wildstar's* core gameplay.

Translating these ideals to a game like *Wildstar* might result in the need of players to recreate a perfect life in a virtual world, thereby attaching them to the game. With time and money sunk in virtual items, 'players potentially develop an emotional attachment to their items, which likewise increases retention' (Deterding 2010, p.12). This is similar to *Farmville*, where people are challenged to build a perfect farm and then showcase it to their friends. The developers can use the sociability of the players to encourage their friends to play together and help maintain each other's housing space as neighbors or roommates, just as *Farmville* invites friends to help build a better farm. This would mean that *Wildstar* could attract more potential subscribers as friends convince each other to play the game in order to help develop or show off their housing space. However, to what extent are such situations, where friends invite each other to play, plausible for MMORPGs? The next chapter will offer more room for discussion about the comparisons between social games and MMORPGs.

4. Reflection

This last chapter will reflect on several discussion points which are concerned with the integration of social game design principles, the player styles in housing which expose an exploitative nature and the relation between housing and C.R.E.D.D.. Starting with the first

discussion point, the use of social game design principles in *Wildstar*. To what degree are social game design principles used in the MMORPG game design of *Wildstar*? There are design similarities and also possible pitfalls when drawing comparisons between social games and MMORPGs. As mentioned in the first chapter, social games use attachment, social proof and reciprocity (Deterding 2010). However, in practice, the exploit of social proof is not completely comparable because the term refers to the use of social networks showing a continuous stream of messages to friends which clearly indicates that a certain player is playing a social game. This doesn't translate to *Wildstar* because of the absence of social networks or any other linked platforms sending out messages to friends. Social proof cannot be completely discarded though, because the housing in *Wildstar* does stimulate the player to invite other players in order to gain the special renown points. Inviting other players can be done in social environments such as guilds where players can also help and become neighbors. However, asking other players would eliminate the option of bringing a new player to the game. This is similar to the research of Andrade e Silva (2013), where he found that players of *The Sims Social* (Playfish, 2011) invite fellow players instead of friends; this is more immediate as opposed to waiting for a friend to help. As a result, the 'effects of viral marketing are significantly reduced, since interactions are enclosed in a group consisting of people who are players already' (Andrade e Silva 2013). The aspect of friend invitation demonstrates how certain design principles of social games are not applicable for comparison or do not deliver fruitful information for analysis. The two remaining exploits, attachment and reciprocity, are definitely present in *Wildstar*. For example, social games such as *Farmville* use mechanics which stimulate mutual gifting and help among players. These mechanics can invoke the feeling of mutual guilt between players and form an obligation among players to keep on playing, which benefits the retention (Deterding 2010). In a similar way, *Wildstar* stimulates players to become neighbors or roommates, which can make the players feel mutually obligated to use their housing space in such a way that it rewards the other player with resources (ores or other usable materials). This design component which is used in *Farmville* and *Wildstar*, confirms the reciprocity of people which 'entangles users in a web of social obligations' (Liszkiewicz 2010).

The second discussion point concerns the appropriation of the housing feature by the players, which might not correspond with the original intention of the developer. An example is the skate park, where a player discarded the mundane properties of housing and created its own ideal space. The interesting part of this discussion point is how player strategies, anticipated or not, can still be beneficial for the developer. Thus, the question is not if the developer has anticipated the appropriation of the players, but rather what it can mean for the developer considering the value of *Wildstar* as a game. There are some noticeable signs of value increasing strategies within *Wildstar's* housing feature, which might not occur to the

average player. These signs can be best explained with the aforementioned explicit and implicit participatory culture, as explained by Schäfer (2011). The players in *Wildstar* are stimulated and motivated explicitly (through quest and challenge rewards) to spend time creating their ideal private space, be it for instrumental purposes or role play. However, on an implicit level, players who use their housing spaces for alternative purposes and then set them to 'public' can add play value to the game as other players may also enter. If for example the skate park (in figure 7) is set to 'public', then random players may enter and are joined by other players who are skating with their mounts. The skate park is an example of playbour, where the labor of players (building that skate park) is labeled as 'user participation', but is exploited by the developer 'for commercial purposes often without acknowledging their labour' (Schäfer 2011, p.146). The newly added content remains within the control sphere of the developer of *Wildstar*. This means that the exploitation of player creativity is part of the game and part of the design which guarantees a continuous stream of new content. In addition, appropriation of the housing space which might not have been foreseen by the developer, still generates new content for players to consume. This can be seen as a form of commodification of play which is stimulated through design.

A third discussion point is the system of C.R.E.D.D. which allows players to buy game time with in-game gold. Housing helps the player acquire gold through daily rewards if the player has made enhancements which yield daily rewards. In addition, becoming a neighbor/roommate will yield additional valuable resources through daily harvesting, which can be sold to obtain in-game gold. This gold can then be used to buy game time. Although daily housing rewards are not worth enough gold in the game to buy C.R.E.D.D., they can contribute greatly to the overall amount of gold that is needed. C.R.E.D.D. can also be used to purchase items. If a player wants to buy many items in the housing area because it wants to role play (free play), it will need a great deal of gold. For example, the Las Vegas inspired housing space in figure 5 and 6 contains many expensive items. Some of these items are not even available for purchase in the item list, but have to be earned through challenges in the core gameplay. These items can also be bought on the auction house, where items can be more expensive than necessary due to supply and demand. Players with little time to gather those items or to complete the challenges in the core gameplay, might buy them with gold acquired from selling C.R.E.D.D. which are bought with dollars. This means that, in the housing area, instrumental players can acquire gold to add to their savings in order to buy game time with C.R.E.D.D. At the same time, players who want to use their housing spaces to build their ideal space, but do not have the gold to do so, can use dollars to buy C.R.E.D.D. and sell this currency to players for gold. Considering this exchange of C.R.E.D.D., it can be argued that the same social game design principles which are apparent in games like *Farmville* also exist in an MMORPG such as *Wildstar*. The design imposes a

certain use, whether it is purely instrumental for daily rewards or free play where housing is used as a creative outlet. Not every player has the time or patience to reach an ideal goal (such as a farm with the best equipment in *Farmville*, or the most creative housing space in *Wildstar*), and the C.R.E.D.D. system allows such a player to use dollars to purchase in-game gold.

Considering the social factors evident in the affordances, design, appropriation and alternative uses of *Wildstar*'s housing feature, it is possible to answer the main research question of how *Wildstar* uses social game design principles to bind players to the game, thereby retaining them as subscriber.

Conclusion

Through discussing the theoretical framework of social game design principles, the mundane circle and commodification of play (Andrade e Silva 2014, Consalvo 2011, Deterding 2010, Järvinen 2010, Zimmerman 2010, Kücklich 2005, Sotamaa 2010, Stenros 2012), this thesis aimed to research political-economic aspects of *Wildstar*'s housing feature. As mentioned in the introduction, there is little research on the developments within the MMORPG genre considering features such as housing. This shortage of research is one of the reasons why this thesis is written. The field of game studies should remain critical about new developments where players are given freedom in a genre which, overall, offers static non-customizable virtual worlds. This thesis offered a study on the affordances, design and appropriation of *Wildstar*'s housing feature, which is done through a structural game analysis and participant observation. The study on the affordances of housing has shown that the player is allowed to customize its own space without the use of external programs or the need of specific knowledge. In addition, it has shown the relations between the core gameplay and housing, as well as the first signs of the mundane circle. Joshua Zimmerman's theoretical concept of the mundane circle was used in this thesis to elaborate on the role that the housing feature wants to achieve. The mundane circle was particularly convenient to illustrate how *Wildstar* uses the housing feature as daily space of retreat, where the player is invited to fulfill daily tasks for bonuses, similar to social games such as *Farmville*.

The analysis of the design highlighted the daily rewards for the player and the benefits of having items in the house to increase the amount of experience points. Through integrating and rewarding sociability in the design of housing, it became clear in which way this design uses the same principles of social games and translates these to the MMORPG genre. The discussion of player behavior and the appropriation of *Wildstar*'s housing has been made possible through observing other players. One of the theoretical concepts this

thesis has used to indicate certain player styles, are instrumental and free play. They have described how players might use their housing space and what role the social game design principles have in the appropriation of the housing feature. The political-economic layer of this appropriation is explained through the explicit and implicit participatory cultures as described by Schäfer, where user participation serves a designed function or purpose. Players are explicitly invited to use the housing feature and their efforts are implicitly used to add value to *Wildstar* (partially illustrated through the concept of playbour), but also keep the player engaged and attached to their own created space (which is similar to social game exploits). The results of this research aimed to answer the main research question:

How is the housing feature in *Wildstar* used by the developer to bind players to the game, thereby retaining them as subscribers?

Based on the analysis and research performed by aforementioned authors in this thesis, I argue that the housing feature in *Wildstar* uses social game design principles to bind the player to the game. Especially (emotional) attachment and reciprocity are built in the design of *Wildstar's* housing space through offering the player daily rewards, a social space of retreat and an outlet for creativity. The housing space can be seen as part of the mundane circle, which is reinforced through signs of domesticity with terms such as 'neighbor' and 'house', but also through stimulating daily return to maintain the housing space. It allows multiple types of commodification of play for the developer. By having neighbors and enforcing reciprocity, the developer creates social obligations to other players to keep playing *Wildstar*. An additional commodification of play is created through the system of C.R.E.D.D. For example, if free play enthusiasts want to build an ornate housing space, they will need gold that they can either save up (which takes time) or buy through offering other players C.R.E.D.D. in return for gold. Instrumental players will gather as much gold as possible and buy C.R.E.D.D. from players who need it and can pay their subscription fee through playing the game. The more implicit type of commodification of play is the extra content that players can deliver through putting their housing spaces on 'public'. In this way, the developer profits from the extra hours of new content that are offered through the creativity of the players. Indeed, new content for players could be a reason to continue the subscription. However, housing in *Wildstar* remains an optional feature for the player, but the game's design does invite the player to use housing in a persistent way. Players also receive rewards for their (unclaimed) housing space, even though they don't have it yet (even before hitting the necessary level). The developer creates a need to be social through rewarding social interaction, which doesn't necessarily result in more subscribers, as has been made clear in chapter three through the analyses of appropriation. Players can exploit social design

through obtaining renown points without ever communicating with other players, because chat is not mandatory. In this way, research of Järvinen and Andrade e Silva about social games could also be extended to other genres using similar design in order to remain critical about such developments and their practical use (2010, 2014). The same is true for player production in the research of Sotamaa concerning *Little Big Planet*. If more game genres are integrating player production techniques, then research should continue to focus on the relationships between developer and player concerning freedom, creativity, control spheres and its economical use.

The problematic nature of research as participant observant, is that additional research is needed to actually determine why players would pay for a new subscription of *Wildstar*. As mentioned before, some of these points are made through the study based on personal experiences in the game and can lead to assumptions. Theorizing that a player uses the beneficial functions of housing might be the largest assumption in this research. This doesn't mean that research on *Wildstar's* housing affordances, design and appropriation is not valid, since it raised interesting situations. However, this research has provided a partial answer to the research question. It has explained how *Wildstar's* housing feature tries to bind the player to the game, but cannot determine if players are also retained as subscriber through the method of playing the game and observing other players. The lack of a complete answer offers room for more research to be conducted concerning player motivation for staying a subscriber. The results of this research are based on an analysis inspired by Mäyrä's description of the structural game analysis, which has allowed this thesis to conduct game research on the level of design (2008). In addition, inspired by Fernández-Vara's book about game analyses, this thesis also researched the gameplay and the players, specifically the correlation of these two (2014). As Fernández-Vara informs the reader, which also applies to my research, 'it is very difficult to account for the role of the player in the game, because different players will participate differently, and will therefore transform the text being analyzed' (Fernández-Vara 2014, p.15). My personal experiences as a player and researcher yielded unique subjective results and have discussed the points I wanted to share on *Wildstar's* housing on an academic level. On the level of game design, player housing should be continued to be researched, because of the converging social game design and housing in MMORPGs, as well as the economic reasons for the developer. Further research could focus on player motivation through surveys or other forms of the quantification of player behavior in *Wildstar* in relation to player housing. As a new media scholar with interests in game studies, I highly welcome different disciplines to play MMORPGs and focus on the use of player housing.

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Figures

Wildstar. *Figure 1 The quest in the red square and the housing representative in-game (screenshot from personal play session)*. Desktop screenshot from the game, edited in Microsoft Paint. 2 September 2014.

Wildstar. *Figure 2 The extra buttons in the interface (in the red square) are present to navigate through the tools in player housing (screenshot from personal play session)*. Desktop screenshot from the game, edited in Adobe Photoshop. 2 September 2014.

Wildstar. *Figure 3 Plots in the red square, enhancement in the blue square (screenshot from personal play session)*. Desktop screenshot from the game, edited in Adobe Photoshop. 2 September 2014.

Wildstar. *Figure 4 Advanced options in edit mode of an item (screenshot from personal play session)*. Desktop screenshot from the game, edited in Adobe Photoshop. 2 September 2014.

Wildstar. *Figure 5 Example of a garden tier, built on a plot (screenshot from personal play session)*. Desktop screenshot from the game, edited in Adobe Photoshop. 2 September 2014.

Wildstar. *Figure 6 Example of the Las Vegas inspired housing space* (screenshot from *Crib of the Week*). 2014. 3 November 2014. <http://wildstaronline.wikia.com/wiki/File:2_-_North_Side.jpg>.

Wildstar. *Figure 7 Second example of the Las Vegas inspired housing space* (screenshot from *Crib of the Week*). 2014. 3 November 2014. <http://wildstaronline.wikia.com/wiki/File:5_-_South_Side.jpg>.

Youtube. *Figure 8 Wildstar's Hoverpark, example of alternative housing use* (screenshot from the Youtube video about the skatepark, uploaded by Cerquaful). Desktop screenshot from the videoclip, edited in Microsoft Paint. 3 November 2014. <<http://youtu.be/21XfKtNobMI>>