In Torpor, Not Dead: A Look at a Collectible Card Game That Sticks Around

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Abstract: *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* (VTES) is a multiplayer Collectible Card Game (CCG). Being one of the first CCGs released in the mid-1990s, VTES has survived going out of print twice. An active community still plays and supports the game. This paper examines the history, the community, and the factors that may have kept the game strong over eighteen years. The paper also aims to capture players' reactions to the game going out of print and publisher stopping support for the second time. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from multiple resources: online survey, interviews, and observations. Preliminary analysis revealed that the community involvement is multilayered and encouraged by the game mechanics. While complex multiplayer game mechanics require interaction among players and foster community creation, it also intimidates new players joining the community. After examining the preliminary results, we will briefly discuss implications for community building.

Introduction

Rapid development of information communication technologies has increased interest to study online gaming communities. While communities emerging around digital games, especially Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) have been of interest to many scholars (Koivisto, 2007; Taylor, 2006), fewer researchers have attempted to examine communities of non-digital games. We are interested in investigating the communities that form around Trading, or Collectible Card Games (CCG). In particular, we will be looking at a multiplayer CCG, *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* (VTES), which requires more than two players.

CCGs are card games for two or more players. Their distinguishing features are the aspect of collection, where a player will acquire cards for their collection, and player design, as the player chooses which cards from their collection they will use to make a particular deck to play with. This fact that each player plays from a different set of cards is part of what sets them apart from other games. Although CCG cards are premade, players design their own decks from the cards they own by choosing which of the cards they will use for a particular game. This, in turn, can imbue a sense of ownership to the card deck and the game.

We are not going to explain in detail the history of CCGs or what they are. For more explanation on the background of CCGs, please see a previous paper (Adinolf & Turkay, 2011). That paper investigated motivational aspects of CCGs with a close examination of VTES. In that paper, authors identified three aspects of CCGs that attract and engage players: collection of cards of varying rarity, creating decks from the cards players have collected, and engaging in community activities with other people who also play the game. Among the three, the community aspect of VTES seems to be the most fun and motivating for players. More than 75% of players in the study had indicated that they like the community aspect of the game to a moderate to large extent (Turkay, Adinolf, & Tirthali, 2012). In their empirical study with *World of Warcraft*, Mysirlaki & Paraskeva (2010) had found a similar relationship between communities and motivation to play the game. They concluded that the development of communities in a game may increase intrinsic motivation to players and enhance their performance in the game.

The relationship between multiplayer games and the communities they spawn is firmly a two way street. A multiplayer game that fails to create a solid community of players will likely fail itself. This is truer for non-digital games, as players need to meet face to face to play. Unlike online games, which can match players from disparate areas, non-digital game players will have a hard time finding other people to play with, if no community forms around a game. In the case of CCGs, the game publishers usually foster this community, as their business model is based around a returning player base, buying expansion packs.

What happens, then, when a CCG goes out of print? In many cases, the community fades quickly. After all, without outside organization, and without the motivation provided by new, exciting cards, entropy will take over, and the community, as well as interest in the game, will dissolve. We will take a particular CCG community, the VTES community, as a special example while mentioning other CCGs in comparison. This line of research with CCGs is driven by their potential as the point of interest which brings people together, and the role of player involvement in games' life cycles. Therefore, our research questions are:

- What aspects of VTES have led players to actively try to keep a game alive after it is no longer in publication?
- What are the different levels of community involvement in the survival of VTES?
- What are players' reactions to discontinuation of production and support from the game company?

Background

The majority of existing studies on CCGs examine the social aspects of these games (e.g., Lenarcic, J & Mackay-Scollay, 2005), but does not look in depth at their power of community creation. This may be true because of several factors. CCG communities may not fit into either of the most commonly researched categories: location based communities and online communities. The communities that evolve around CCGs are a sort of hybrid, consisting of a large number of small, location based communities of interest, spread across the world. Each local playgroup might seem quite small, but via online forums, Facebook groups, and larger events where players come from around the world, the aggregate is a far larger community structure. This makes it difficult to fit into one category. In a similar vein, Kinkade & Katovich (2009)'s ethnographic study describes existence of *Magic the Gathering* (MTG) community in local Texas and makes a note that websites, such as forums, are the places where MTG players foster the sense of community. Below is their description of MTG players connecting online and offline (Kinkade & Katovich, 2009, p.22):

> As people become connected more ethereally to each other, and as their sense of community becomes less linked to conventional time and space anchors, becoming a regular seems more detached from the markers that other ethnographers, in established places open at discrete times, observed. The idea of anonymous regularity, more applicable it would seem to web sites, becomes more apparent in face-to-face encounters such as MTG. What we observed in MTG seems as an extension of a transition observed in web sites in which commonly accepted definitions of time and space give way to more ethereal versions as new communities form.

Acknowledging the methodological and practical difficulties of studying communities that exist both online and offline, in this study we will aim to investigate the VTES community that has supported the game over 17 years, even when the game company stopped publishing and supporting the game, and characteristics of VTES that create and nourish the existence of this community. The following section is a description of VTES and its design characteristics that distinguish it from other CCGs.

What is Vampire the Eternal Struggle (VTES)?

In 1994, following on the heels of his massively successful *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG), Richard Garfield revealed VTES, originally titled *Jyhad to the World* (Extrala). Having learned from watching people playing MTG, Garfield designed VTES to be a more socially dynamic game (vtesinla.org). In a nutshell, VTES is a multiplayer game, with every player acting for themselves. Unlike many multiplayer games though, each player only has one player who they directly want to attack—their *prey*. Likewise, there is only one person who directly benefits if a player is *ousted* from the game, that player's *predator*. This predator-prey system creates the opportunity for temporary alliances among players who are not yet in direct conflict. They may agree to act in accord out of mutual self-interest. Thus, unlike two player, or multi-player free for all games, VTES has a built in structure encouraging discussion and deal making. While the players may be enemies during play, they may be friends, mentors, or collaborators in the broader context of the play community.

In 1998, after 2 years of no new publications, the publisher, Wizards of the Coast, announced that they would be halting production of VTES. The game remained out of print for 2 years, until 2000, when White Wolf picked up the game. Right out of the gate, the returning expansion, Sabbat War, sold out. For the next 10 years, the game continued publication until September 2010, when White Wolf announced they would cease printing and supporting the game once again. As of January 2012, the game company does not own any VTES cards.

In order to keep the game fresh, the two successive companies that owned the game published 20 expansions over thirteen years. These expansions had varying numbers of new cards and new rules. As these expansions were released, VTES followed a different design and play strategy than MTG. Namely, the designers of VTES went to great lengths to ensure that as many cards as possible remained playable. Indeed, there are, at the time of this writing, only 11 cards ever banned from tournament play. MTG, on the other hand, has a far larger banned list, and indeed the most popular format, known as "Type 2", allows only the 2 most recent blocks of expansions. These philosophies each aim for the same thing: to allow players to be as equal as possible in a tournament setting, even if they haven't been collecting cards for very long. *Vampire* does it by trying to keep the power level even over time, while MTG does it by essentially completely resetting every two sets. As a player, the first author finds the MTG strategy to be unappealing and overly commercial, but perhaps that partly explains its far greater financial success.

In summary, distinguishing aspects that might be supporting community of VTES are its multiplayer aspect, complex gameplay and relatively inexpensive card collection.

Communities and Games

When we talk about emergent communities in games, we are mainly referring to choice based communities or communities of interest, centered on playing a particular game, rather than location based communities. Community members meet, either physically or virtually, to play, discuss and socialize. There may be several layers of such communities, with varying degrees of connectivity.

Communities in online games, such as MMOs, almost always form thanks to their built-in easily accessible communication channels and thanks to the gameplay itself (Koivisto, 2007). Game mechanics and the game world can support and mediate the community. These communities are also supported outside of the game through forums, fan fictions, and/or gaming conventions.

Although they may not be as large as online game communities, communities that form around a single card game can also be very strong (Yu, 2007). Every participant contributes to the community at some level. For example, in the case of VTES, a player might be involved with their local play group, but that group might be a part of the larger regional, national, or international VTES culture. Participation in the community might be as little as coming out occasionally to play a game or as involved as participating in in-depth discussions of rules and strategies both online and offline, traveling long distances to participate in major tournaments, and even designing cards for expansions.

These gaming groups "create cultural systems" (Fine, 1983, p.2). Through player interaction and participation, these shared cultures can become extensive and meaningful for player groups (Fine, 1983). Kinkade & Katovich (2009) state that becoming a participant in the community and contributing to the dynamics of the game are more important for MTG players than the competitive game-play itself. At many occasions, player communities decide whether they will let a game die or make it survive, especially after the game company no longer supports the game.

Although many games have been discontinued, there is a lack of literature about what happens to the game and the game community after the publisher stops supporting a game. A few studies have examined the closure and after closure of MMOs (e.g., Papargyris & Polumenaku, 2009; Peace, 2009; Consalvo & Begy, 2011). However in the case of CCGs, the literature is close to nonexistent.

There are differences between what happens when an online game shuts down and when a CCG is no longer supported by the game company. Players of online games may be able to keep the game alive through creating fan fiction and memorial websites for their game (Consalvo and Begy, 2011; Pearce, 2009). For example, Consalvo and Begy (2011) describe how Faunasphere players created a Facebook group and an online forum to share their experiences from the game through fan fictions and stories after it shut down. Papargyris & Polumenaku (2009)'s study documented player attempts to negotiate with game creators and community's move to another game after Earth & Beyond shut down. While the shutdown of an online game may mean that players lose their game, this is not the case for CCGs. Although there may not be any more new cards published by the game company, the player community can continue to use existing cards, and may design new cards and modify the game rules.

As documented, fans contribute significantly to CCG's existence similar to online gaming communities. Bisz (2009) talks about *Middle Earth CCG* (MECCG), a CCG based on J. R. R. Tolkein's Middle-Earth. Players make efforts of the to keep the game alive in any way they can, such as creating game art and organizing tournaments, and participating in discussion forums after it went out of print in 1999. He elaborates on how after the game was out of print, MECCG players chose to change the game goal from winning to just experiencing the relaxed and fun game with friends.

Similarly, while VTES publisher, White Wolf, has stopped printing the game, and no longer supports it, players have stepped up, for a second time, to support the game. VEKN, the player run organization that organized tournaments during the first hiatus from 1996 to 2000, has stepped back into the role. During the first period of inactivity of VTES, local playgroups sometimes designed their own cards for use to keep the game interesting (see Figure 1 for an example). This time around, the *international* community is already creating new cards for play and online publication. VEKN maintains current rules for both casual and tournament games. They also adjudicate disputes over card rules and interactions. As of today, VEKN has 1083 members registered on their site. Thus the community is taking steps to ensure its survival on many fronts, which we will examine later in this paper.

After presenting our data collection methods, we will discuss what we found about player attitudes about the community, closure of the game, and their plans about the future of the game.

Figure 1: On the left is a custom made card. On the right is an original VTES card.

Participants and Design

We used online surveys, interviews, and observational data to develop an understanding of why and how the VTES community keeps the game alive and how VTES players felt about the closure of the game for the second time.

An online survey was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data through snowball sampling on public and private VTES forums and players' personal blogs. A total of 365 players ranging in age from 18 to 59 (M = 32.17, SD = 6.4) filled out the survey. On average participants have been playing VTES 9.82 years (SD = 4.95). 57.7 % of them were from European countries and 35.3% were from North America (USA and Canada). Players from 39 countries filled out the survey. In addition to the demographic data, we collected data on participants' play habits (e.g. how do you construct decks?) with five multiple-choice, three 7-point Likert scale and seven open ended questions. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven VTES players during a tournament in North East United States. We asked six questions about their involvement in the VTES community and the role of the community in their motivation to play the game (e.g. What do you enjoy about the VTES community? How has your role changed since White Wolf announced that they will stop publishing and supporting the game?). We also conducted analysis of the forum postings to understand player reactions to the announcement right after the game company announced that they will cease publishing and supporting the game. Data included 105 individual posts from 70 players in two VTES forums. Data was analyzed using the quantitative data analysis software SPSS 18.0 and qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 9.0 by using inductive codes. The next section presents preliminary findings on the research questions.

Findings
Where is the VTES community?
Players come together to play VTES once or twice in a week either in a game shop or in one of the player's houses. They prefer local gaming shops because there is a built in community with mentors and a competitive atmosphere. For example, New York players worry about nonexistence of a game shop in Manhattan, NY, where they can both play and introduce the game to other players.

Another place where VTES players can meet is VTES online or JOL (jol.net). It is a text based environment and requires players to type commands in order to play. We are not going to go in detail about differences between the online and offline game, as it is a topic for another discussion. Similar to the previous findings on online versions of CCGs (Bisz, 2009, Trammer, 2010), players do not find online play as satisfying as face-to-face play. However, many use JOL to try out new ideas and challenge themselves against interesting deck designs. Also, players use online forums or a Facebook group to just stay in touch with other players.

What did players say about the VTES community?
In the online survey, 76% of participants stated that they are motivated to play VTES mostly because of the community, and 14% of participants mentioned community as one of the main differences of VTES from other CCGs they have played. The following is a representative quote from a Hungarian player "First of all the players. We have a good community. Also this game forces you to think and it has great and exciting game method and clear rules." [SP*44] Similar to MTG players in Trammell's (2010) study, many VTES players also consider the game as a hobby and a reason to get together with friends they like. Exchanging ideas is one of the functions of the community. This fosters generation of interesting concepts for decks. One player stated that he liked that VTES players are very open to give good ideas for his deck even if they may play against the deck in the tournament.

All the players we interviewed indicated that the VTES community is a major motivation for them to play. One of the players mentioned the VTES community being similar to a club one belongs to and enjoys the club activity: playing VTES. One player also admitted that the importance of the community for him has increased over time for the last five years. Two of the interviewees emphasized the common likings in other types of games among the VTES community members they have met. This opens another opportunity to "hang out" with players they like. As an Italian player states "I like the game mechanics, but mostly what makes VTES a good game for me is the community and the possibility of meeting interesting people to play with all around the world." [SP79]

Players enjoy the VTES community for several reasons. Among those are friendliness and a common interest in playing similar games other than VTES. Both in the survey and in the interviews, players mentioned that in general, VTES players are very hospitable, mature, and gracious. It seems to be a common practice to find other VTES players when travelling to other cities. They also like the sense of common purpose or interest they share with people around the world.

When we asked whether game mechanics have any effect on the community building aspect of VTES, all the interviewees answered yes. They mentioned the multiplayer aspect of VTES which encourages and requires interacting with other players not only in a competitive but also, many times, in a cooperative manner (cross table ally mechanic). Relatively long game sessions were also given as an example of mechanics that allow people to talk during the game play. For example, a VTES game session can go up to 2 hours, and tournaments can take up to 8 hours. In these sessions, the amount of thinking, strategizing, making deals and trying to win while every other player is trying the same, creates a unique social gameplay experience. Oftentimes, players carry metacognitive discussions about their game play outside of the game. They discuss their achievements, mistakes and possible changes that need to be made to their decks. These discussions take place face to face as well as online. All of these may help players to get to know each other quicker and forge friendships.

How did players react to the news of discontinuation of company support?
Players received the announcement of discontinuation on multiple online VTES forums on September 2010. In two of the popular VTES forums, players reacted to the announcement in various ways. There were 105 forum posts from 70 players as a reply to the announcement. Over 25% of players expressed their sadness, disappointment and somewhat frustration because there would be neither new cards nor reprints produced by the company. Along with the sadness, many followed with thanks

to certain people involved in keeping VTES running over ten years. A majority of postings, 76, showed hope for the future of the game and determination to play VTES and organize local tournaments for the game they love. They not only came up with ideas to keep the game alive but also showed examples of CCGs that went out of print but still have active player communities, such as MECCG or Star Trek CCG. Along with hope, players also admit that without new cards being published, it would be difficult for the community to get larger as the new players have to depend on the old players. Others, 13 players, showed indifference or resignation towards the news while 17 showed confusion regarding the reasons of the game company's decision to cease production, and some players felt misguided with respect to the reasons. Many players commented on the closure with humor by using cards or rules from VTES, as the theme has much to do vampires and death. Torpor is a term used in VTES when a character becomes incapable of acting until rescued by spending resources. Following is one player expressing his hope: "I really hope the game will continue, and maybe one day someone will have the 2 points of blood needed to do the 'rescue torpor action'" [FP65]

Among the players we interviewed, discontinuation affected different players in different ways. While some became more active, others did not change at all. For example, one of the participants started a blog to document his creative ideas about deck building and keep the interest in VTES by inviting other players to comment on his ideas, and to publicize the results of the local league he initiated to encourage competitive gameplay.

What are the different levels of involvement of the VTES community?
There are various levels of player involvement in the community. Being an active player is the most basic, and important one. Two of the interviewees described themselves as players who will play at tournaments because they do not have enough people in their town to play the game regularly. So, they travel to big events to meet with the community members and play the game.

Players produce a knowledge base through wikis and blogs about the game similar to players of popular digital games. Many player blogs contribute to distributing knowledge about VTES, brainstorm deck design ideas, and inform others about tournaments. There are many fan created instructional videos and recordings of VTES games on YouTube as well as other forms of fan fiction such as rap songs written by using the VTES card texts or videos of scripted plays with game characters.

Higher-level involvement in the community includes being a "prince" of a city, which usually requires organizing tournaments and encouraging new players to join the game community. Furthermore, some players take the role of a national coordinator and fan designed cards such as one of our interviewees. He summarizes his role as "...I try to be a player as everybody else while at the same time I am also currently national coordinator for US. So, I help with tournament coordination…I am a liaison with the global players network… as far as I say people are generous and gracious, I try to do the same. I invite people and glad to show them around the town when they visit. I am often a source of wisdom of deck building strategies, people often come to me for that…since the CCP stopped the game, I am the design team leader for the upcoming fan set.. my role has changed from perpetuating the game through participation to perpetuating the game through content creation" [IP4]

Discussion and Conclusion
What aspects of a CCG will lead players to actively try to keep a game alive after it is no longer in publication? Do games with better social mechanics promote a stronger sense of community and camaraderie? Do strategically deep games do the same? We can't answer these questions in a general sense. Our data comes from only one CCG. Nor is it feasible for us to expand our study to the breadth such a survey of the industry would require. After all, we would have to: identify multiple games in both categories, both player supported and not; find players that currently play the former, and, more difficult, those who had played the latter. This means that, to be statistically meaningful, such a study would involve tracking down hundreds of players individually and then trying to administer a questionnaire or interview.

At this time a study of such scope is beyond our means to conduct. What we tried to provide is a snapshot of one community that has been established over 18 years of game's life and echo players' reactions to the closure of VTES. This paper presents initial findings from the data collected so far.
Many respondents admit the expectation of losing some players over time and difficulty of new players' involvement, but also think that the game will continue thanks to the large card pool, stable mechanics, dedicated core community, offline or online. One of the main differences between online

games that close and offline games that go out of print, is that online games disappear, while cards still allow play to continue. As one of the interviewees emphasized "...just because CCP stopped publishing the game, cards will not stop working". Another similar comment from a forum poster read: "The game's not dead. CCP tactical teams are not going to abseil through your window just because you haven't burned your cards." [FP96] Similar to many in VTES community, we also hope that.

While the publisher ceases to make money after a CCG goes out of print, designers, especially of educational games would be happy to see their games in circulation and play for as long as possible. Therefore, we believe that observing the lifecycle of games that go out of print can inform educational game designers. Incorporating elements from games like VTES, which have developed loyal communities for years might help increase the impact of a serious game, by increasing its longevity, and the intensity of the community that develops around it.

Endnotes
(1) *SP = Survey Participant; IP = Interview Participant; FP = Forum Participant

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