Chapter 13
Technology, Agency, and Community:
The Case of Modding in World of Warcraft

Bonnie Nardi
University of California, USA

Jannis Kallinikos
London School of Economics, UK

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors consider whether and to what extent digital technologies enable people to accomplish expressive activities of personal or social value by examining customization and extension of software artifacts. They approach their topic within the context of multiplayer online games that provide a rather radical departure from the studies of organizational technologies that dominate the field. While less constrained by the rigid social order of organizations, the customization and extension of software artifacts in communities like those represented by multiplayer online games still confronts the central issue of the malleability of these artifacts and their power to shape human agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers whether and to what extent digital technologies enable people to accomplish expressive activities of personal or social value. We explore these questions by examining customization and extension of software artifacts in the context of multiplayer online games. We connect a creative engagement with software artifacts with the potential emergence of new cultural meanings and means of satisfying desires for self-expression. Such an orientation obviously departs from the dominant tradition of mainstream information studies to which industrial informatics certainly belongs (e.g. Ronnback et al. 2007). Technology has traditionally been deployed as a productive force, first in industrial organizations and later in other sectors of modern societies. These conditions have historically established the dominant motif whereby technology has been conceived, designed and implemented as means to the accomplishment of pre-established ends. Despite the flaws and limitations of this project, technologies have firmly been inscribed within the stratified (power-based) social topology of organizations and the prevailing division of labor (Noble,1984; Perrow, 2002). Against

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this backdrop, it comes as no surprise that widely used organizational technologies such as workflow and enterprise resource planning systems (ERP) inhibit creativity and self-expression. Not only must rigid protocols be observed in order to interact with such systems, there is little possibility to customize and even less to extend them. Interaction is relegated to a narrow instrumental band of human activity that brackets or suspends the broad range of a person's "interests, values, feelings, and orientations underlying their personality" (Kallinikos, 2004b).

Despite a broad awareness of the social origins and purposes of technology as outlined above (see e.g. Zuboff 1988), the question concerning the ability of technology to shape human agency and organizational structures and processes represents a highly contested issue. Over the last two decades, it has been quite common to assume that far from being closed and pre-determined, technological systems are substantially renegotiated and reshaped in situ (e.g. Holmstrom and Boudreau, 2006; Orlikowski, 2000, 2007; Suchman, 1987/2007). According to this view, the ways technologies are involved in particular settings are heavily contingent on the social practices and the organizational arrangements that prevail in these settings as well as the skills and proclivities of situated agents. Human interest, ingenuity, and creativity have thus been seen as indispensable components of the encounter of humans with artifacts of every kind. This work indicates that it is not possible to eliminate these human capabilities through deliberate technological design and prescriptive social orders. Concerns similar to those of our own have therefore been explored in the standard organizational settings by placing particular emphasis on the situated assemblage of factors and human attributes that transform and reshape, each time differently, the disembodied functionalities of technological systems or artifacts.

There is little doubt that such an understanding of technology has reinstated the significance of the social context that has historically tended to be ignored or seriously underestimated by rationalistic or engineering views on the matter. Yet, fruitful as it has been, such an understanding of technology nonetheless leaves a set of crucial questions in suspense, that is:

- To which degree do technological systems yield to the reshaping power of the social context into which they are embedded?
- Are technologies infinitely malleable?
- Are there any systematic differences between technologies or families of artifacts as concerns their degree of malleability that could thus be traced to the constitution of the technology as distinct from the social context? (Kallinikos, 2006).

Answering these questions, we suggest, makes necessary the persistent meditation on the nature of technology and the way it has historically been involved in the making and regulation of human affairs (Borgmann, 1984, 1999; Winner, 1986, 1993). Technology, we would like to claim, is a distinctive realm of the social. It represents a materially embodied form for accomplishing particular functions, expressing and mediating at the same time the social relations under which such an effort takes place. In this respect technology is surely socially constructed—yet under conditions of a skew social division of power, and differently distributed capacities, inclinations and skills. Particular technologies entail long developmental trajectories that reflect creative responses to solving problems that have been layered one upon another to form a complex and opaque regulative regime into which some social groups may have less freedom or power than others. "Artifacts have politics", Winner (1986) has poignantly reminded us.

As suggested above, we would like to explore in this paper the degree to which humans are able to bend technological systems or use them in creative and expressive ways. But such a project cannot