

Chapter XLVIII

Playing Roles in the MMORPG Kingdom of Loathing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the roles players created, and how these structured their online relationships, in an online massively multi-player role-playing game, Kingdom of Loathing—a low-tech browser-based game with a satirical, humorous style. Existing research has often sought to understand players' actions by classifying them into “types”, determined by motivations for play or patterns of behaviour. However, such typologies are shown to be problematic, particularly in the way that they might be interpreted as predicting behaviour. Instead, a phenomenographic exploration was undertaken, looking at players' experiences, the roles they took up, and how they learned to perform these. This exploration shows that classifications of players are an over-simplification. Instead, the classification should apply to examples of play—not least because the game itself was not “fixed” but was constantly re-designed in response to play. This has implications for research methodology, but also for the (ongoing) design of games.

INTRODUCTION

Although there is a lot of interest in the social aspects of online games, our understanding of this remains limited. In this chapter, a study is presented that explored the roles players of a massively multi-player online roleplaying game (MMORPG), an online game in a fantasy setting with thousands of simultaneous players, created for themselves. This is used to critique existing research on player classifications, and implications for research methodology are identified.

BACKGROUND

Role-playing games achieve their success by blending play and narrative, and massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) supplement this by adding social elements (Carr, Burn, Schott, & Buckingham, 2003). This motivational aspect of role-playing games, and of MMORPGs in particular, has become a recurrent research focus. Previous studies have identified motivations that players can hold. Fine (1983),

for example, talks about escapism (from self or conventions), sense of control and sociability, as well as play for educational benefit and for fun. Although useful as a starting point, however, these seem to be very different kinds of motivations, and a list does little to explain their interactions or their effects. It remains a list, rather than forming a framework for further studies. A different way of conceptualising motivation is needed to account for the observed complexities of players' actions, and it is this problem that will be addressed here.

Other studies have worked to develop firmer theoretical foundations for discussions of motivation. For example, Carr et al.'s (2003) study of the MMORPG *Anarchy Online* revealed various styles of play—such as collaborative, role-play intensive scenarios, or power-levelling. They identify three kinds of motivation for play. The first are ludic motivations, concerned with mastery of the game. The second are representational, focusing on presentational, narrative and performative aspects, such as being “in character”. The last are communal, addressing the desire to be part of a social grouping. These motivations clearly relate to Fine's list, but provide a more analytic taxonomy.

The communal element is worth further consideration. In Carr et al.'s study, communal elements played out primarily in the context of clans—self-organised groups of players that collaborate to achieve complex goals, provide mutual support, overcome challenges too large for individual players, and so on (Lin, Sun, & Tinn, 2003). Clans raise interesting questions about in-game and out-of-game socialisation, and about how to enforce agreed codes of behaviour (ibid). Interestingly, however, Lin et al. concluded that the primary purpose of clans “is not for social purposes but for character survival and success [...] since slaying monsters or capturing castles are impossible tasks for solo players” (p. 297). This idea will be returned to later.

Moreover, the ludic and representational elements can also be hard to separate. There is a tradition in the games studies literature that proposes that the construction of characters is shaped by the features of games—what the game “affords” thus provides players with a repertoire from which to construct a particular character (e.g., Carr et al., 2003). Thus “good” games are argued to provide richer opportunities for such expression than other kinds of game (e.g., Gee, 2003).

Fine (1983) also considered social motivations, but focused more on the interactions *around* games rather than within them, such as between the game creator and publisher. For pen-and-paper role-playing games, he discussed differentiation within groups of players, for example, by leadership role or specialisation. He also talks about motivations for play (essentially, ludic and representational), differentiating players who wish to immerse themselves in strange settings and hence “play themselves”, from those who play an extension of their character, and those who play a character consistently, even when this goes against their own best interests in making progress through the game. (Using Carr et al.'s terminology, for these players, the representational motivations overwhelm the ludic ones.) However, this discussion remains very general.

Although more has been written about motivation (e.g., the classic works by Malone & Lepper, 1987), much of what remains addresses game structures (assumed to cause motivation in players) or is reminiscent of what is reviewed here. All this reveals little about *styles* of play. Carr et al.'s study goes some way towards this, although they primarily contrast role-players (seeking narrative immersion) with “roll players” (seeking to power-play). Similarly, Lin and Sun (2005) use Rieber's four categories of motivation to differentiate play as power, as progress, as fantasy, and as self. They also illustrate how the boundaries between acceptable and deviant play are contested—for example, whether some

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