Chapter 3
A Practice–Based Analysis of Social Interaction in a Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes behaviour in on-line games from a practice-oriented perspective and focuses on how individuals create and sustain social structures. It reports on research based in MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) that investigates how what the players do in the gaming environment can give rise to structures that continue to exist outside that environment. The analysis centres on the notion of how practice is framed within the game; the methodology is one based on virtual ethnography. It describes the activities of a group of gamers in both MMOGs and other on-line settings. It will show how such players develop an identity as members of a 'community of games players' and how their gaming practices are not based around a single game but are spread across several different platforms.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we analyze behaviour in on-line games from a practice-oriented perspective. The analysis uses concepts drawn from Communi-

ties of Practice (Wenger, 1998), Activity Theory (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999) and the notion of Social Capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Interest in on-line gaming behaviour goes back to studies of multiplayer on-line games such as MUDS (Multiple User DungeonS) and MOOs (MUDS Object Oriented) in 1990s. These early

studies were primarily concerned with how individuals created an on-line identity. More recent studies have focused how groups of individuals create symbolic meanings through interactions within a community of games players (Chen, Duh, Phuah, & Lam, 2006), and it is this line of enquiry that our work will follow.

We report upon recent research using MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) that focuses on how 'virtual' community structures emerge through engagement in such games and the practices that underlie them. MMOGs are particularly suited to this type of work as their inherent social connectivity allows them to act as both interfaces to virtual spaces and community support systems. They are effectively videogames played online that allow players to interact, not only with the gaming software, but also with large numbers of other players. Such games create a world where players can interact for a limited period, which can last from a few hours to several months. Typically, the players of such games seek entertainment, online socialization and the acquisition of a reputation within a community of online gamers (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003).

In a previous paper (Milolidakis, Kimble, & Akoumianakis, 2009) we argued that practices are not necessarily framed solely as social interaction, but may be embedded into the artefacts, tools and processes involved in game play. Building on this, our current work aims to provide insight into what practices make up the gaming experience. The goal of this research is to understand what players do in the gaming environment and how this gives rise to structures that can be maintained outside that environment.

Using virtual ethnography, we examine two interrelated issues: the tools, processes and artefacts that allow players to set, negotiate and achieve shared goals, and the emergent structures that result from game play. The analysis centres on how the notion of practice is framed within the game; the ways in which practice can be encapsulated in the artefacts that enable the players to interact,

co-operate and compete; and the degree to which this results in sustainable social ties between the members; either within or outside the gaming environment.

The structure of the remainder of the article is as follows. The section below outlines the theoretical background for the work and briefly outlines the notion of practice as found in Communities of Practice (CoPs) in general and virtual CoPs in particular; Activity Theory as it relates to virtual settings; and the notion of Social Capital. The second section describes the research setting and methodology. The bulk of the remaining sections describe the findings. These are organized under the following headings: textually mediated social interaction; artefacts in gaming practices; crossing tool boundaries; and community practices and Social Capital. The chapter concludes with some comments on how we conceptualize on-line gaming and how we should view the boundaries of the platforms that support it.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The early 1990s saw a sudden surge of interest in virtual communities, stimulated by books such as Howard Rheingold's "The Virtual Community" (Rheingold, 1993) and by the sudden and rapid expansion of what would now be termed social networks such as the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). In tandem, there was a growing interest in on-line games such as MUDS and MOOs. Most of the work in this area was concerned with issues of identity (Bruckman, 1993), although later work also looked at interaction and highlighted the role played by social relationships (Conkar, Noyes, & Kimble, 1999). The concepts presented below provide the theoretical context for our practice based analysis of social interaction inside and outside MMOGs.

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