

Virtual Role-Playing Communities, “Wold” and World

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of online role-playing games, and the virtual communities they create, are attracting much attention from business and academics. These virtual communities and environments provide invaluable opportunities for researchers to investigate various social and psychological aspects and issues. In this short article, we would like to share our views on some of these issues and opportunities in establishing a community identity with various virtual and real aspects, and transferring knowledge between these two aspects.

BACKGROUND

A fantasy role-playing game is one which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment. (Lortz, 1979, p. 36). Gaming fantasy combines the expressive freedom of fantasy with the structure characteristics of games. Fantasy role-playing gamers, the party of players and game masters, create their own cultural systems, generating identities and meanings in complex social worlds (Fine, 2002).

Online role-playing games have developed entire virtual worlds and communities with a sense of purpose, a shared history, and complex social interactions (Powasek, 2001; Murray, 2004). While the primary purpose of these (online) gaming communities is to have fun, nestled within them are important social and psychological phenomena such as identity construction, storytelling, learning, leadership, cooperation, and competition, which can/should be seen from the viewpoint of communities of practice. Moreover, phenomena emerging in these online

communities can also be investigated almost entirely by unconventional online research methods. For example, our work on the Woldian games includes participation as an online member and the use of entirely information and communication technology (ICT) tools to research the emergence of interesting phenomena in the community.

The fantasy world of Wold, which began as a homemade local campaign in 1985, now has become an online community with almost 100 active members, who asynchronously interact with each other by posting on various boards for gaming and chatting within the community Web site, www.woldiangames.com. By paying the utmost attention to maintaining its free and volunteer nature, blending veteran players with new recruits, the Woldian world has achieved a lot as a community. When the life companion of one member passed away, an hour of silence was conducted on the players' chatting board to show their grief. The Woldian world also has made good use of its online environment by archiving all the games and chats, and providing virtual facilities for learning, research, and development.

Online fantasy role-playing communities like Woldian games present interestingly complex cases in the sense that they are built upon three different dimensions: (1) the real world, (2) a fantasy world, and (3) an online, virtual world, which blend with each other in an interesting manner. Even the term “virtual” means the mental/fantasy and the online/computerized aspect together. While both the fantasy and virtual world would share the common denominator of non-reality, the online dimension provides the environment that makes this mixing of reality and non-reality possible in an unprecedented way. The various types of knowledge transfer in the form of identity and experience that occur between

the different real, virtual, and mental dimensions are highlighted here.

As a representational format, ICT operates as a sensual masking. The character chosen by a role-player can be seen as a mask acting as a metaphor for the person. Just as the transfer of knowledge from IT to production (the CAD and 3D modeling systems) materially affects our architectural world, the roles played in virtual worlds can have an important practical impact on our personal identities and personalities. Besides, the two terms—object and metaphor—inform each other. Having been involved in fantasy role-playing, it becomes difficult to think of fantasy creatures without seeing them as a particular form of computer user (Wiszniewski & Coyne, 2002). In fact, the self-images that people create in virtual communities show that there is a reflection of the person in the fantasy character that is created and played. These reflections may be physical, but also may be aspects of a person’s personality. Some players almost self-consciously construct a persona that is completely opposite to the one they project in real life. The virtual environment provides a filter and can be used as a way to express a different side of personalities, escape the social constraints of real life, or experiment and find out what kind of person one wants to be in real life (Twist, 2004). Furthermore, in the fantasy role-playing games, personal rivalries can also be masked as role rivalries, for example, when determining who will be leading others (Fine 2002). In Wold, in one case, players threatened to leave the game, having developed hard feelings about the leader’s role in the game.

FUTURE TRENDS AND CONCLUSION

As Puwasek (2001) and Twist (2004) point out, tens of millions of people worldwide interact in online games, and that number is growing. Role-playing games have developed entire virtual worlds and communities with complex social elements and interactions aside from the aspect of gaming. This can become so complex that sometimes the boundary between the virtual fantasy and real worlds becomes indistinct. The more technological or administrative

control players have over their fantasy characters, the more likely the character is some sort of reflection of the real person, a creation of a new reality in a mirror world.

We would like to conclude our article with these suggestions for further analysis and research into online fantasy role-playing communities:

- Various studies have already been conducted to understand these virtual fantasy realities. Much of the interest here has been given to real-time games. However, asynchronous communication methods, such as the one in the Woldian campaigns and chats, also deserve special attention, since this method is specifically regarded as being open to discussion promoting the development of understanding, even through disagreements (Joinson, 2003), and better enabling to players to manage their own time, in general.
- The Japanese concept “ba” that addresses the (1) real, (2) mental, and (3) virtual (ICT using) contexts for knowledge creation (Von Krogh, Ichijo & Nonaka, 2000) can match well with the fantasy, online, and real aspects of the online fantasy role-playing communities, making them good examples of ba that exemplify its philosophical underpinnings.

Finally, studies to make sense of these special communities of practice are important, not only because they increasingly are becoming part of our lives, but also because analogies can be drawn for our default lives from the results of these studies. What could make the difference for our lives can be not only the similarities, but also the differences between these two modes of living.

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