Chapter 14
A Qualitative Analysis of Online Gaming: Social Interaction, Community, and Game Design

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) has risen dramatically over the last decade. Some gamers spend many hours a day in these virtual environments interacting with other gamers, completing quests, and forming social groups. The present study set out to explore the experiences and feelings of online gamers. The study comprised 71 interviews with online gamers (52 males and 19 females) from 11 different countries. Many themes emerged from the analyses of the interview transcripts including (i) engaging in social interaction, (ii) being part of a community, (iii) learning real-life skills, (iv) gaining in-game rewards, (v) playing never-ending games (vi) escaping from real life, (vii) playing longer than intended, and (viii) being obligated towards other gamers in-game. These findings specifically showed the many positives of online gaming (including the social interaction and the community aspects of belonging) as well as the in-game features within MMORPGs that in some cases can lead to excessive online gaming. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to previous qualitative and quantitative research in the area.

INTRODUCTION

Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are very popular and are now played by hundreds of thousands of gamers throughout the world simultaneously (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). MMORPGs provide an immersive, dynamic and highly interactive computer gaming experience with a fully developed multi-player universe (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell,

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2003). Furthermore, socialisation in MMORPGs is an important aspect of game play and may provide stimulating experiences for gamers. For instance, research by Hussain and Griffiths (2008) showed that 21% of gamers said they preferred socialising online to offline, and more male gamers than female gamers said that they found it easier to converse online than offline. The gamers saw the online worlds as pleasant and satisfying environments that provided equality among players. Cole and Griffiths (2007) explored the social interactions that occurred both within and outside of MMORPGs. An online survey was completed by 912 gamers from 45 countries, and reported that MMORPGs were highly socially interactive environments providing the opportunity to create strong friendships and emotional relationships. Playing MMORPGs offered the opportunity to experience teamwork, encouragement, and fun. However, one of the limitations of the study was that a self-selected sample was used that may not have been representative of the population of online gamers. Most other studies (e.g., Bessiere, Seay & Kiesler, 2007; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Lo, Wang & Fang, 2005) can also be criticised for using self-selected samples.

MMORPGs are designed to provide a social environment where gamers can interact, form groups and complete tasks together. Ducheneaut and Moore's (2004) analysis of player-to-player interaction in the online game *Star Wars Galaxies* (*SWG*) used ethnographic methods to observe gamer behaviour and interaction in heavily trafficked locations within the game. It was found that *SWG* was structured to maximise player-to-player encounters, some locations in-game were designed to provide a particular service (e.g. healing battle fatigue in a cantina/bar) or force people to wait (e.g., waiting for the shuttle at the starport). These locations were social spaces where interaction was encouraged. The limitations of the study were that the analysis focused on only two locations in the online world and many interactions were not observed (e.g., group messages and private messages) making the analysis unrepresentative of the entire interactions taking place in SWG.

One of the unique aspects of MMORPGs is the formation of groups, also known as guilds, clans or crews. Guilds are common in online gaming and form part of the interactive experience. Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore (2006) explored the social dynamics of MMORPGs by examining longitudinal data collected directly from the *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. These authors were interested in understanding how MMORPGs function as social worlds. They focused on three aspects of the game; play time, grouping, and guilds. Game playing data was gathered from various servers and then analysed. The researchers began by observing players in-game in order to obtain important background knowledge of the online world. Player data were then collected directly from the game server and analysed. In total 129,372 gamers were observed. The data revealed that the average playing time per character was 10.2 hours. *WoW* encouraged gamers to join groups by making quests and dungeons in the game too difficult to be tackled alone. Gamers joined guilds of up to 40 players and there was an increase in guild grouping at the higher levels (levels 55-59). The data showed that 66% of gamers were in a guild, and that large groups were seen as a factor contributing to MMORPG popularity, as well as being a place where important relationships were formed. The study showed that *WoW* is a social environment with a carefully crafted reward structure that encouraged group formation and interaction. One of the main limitations of this study was the focus on a single MMORPG that prevented cross-game comparison.

Chen, Sun, and Hsieh (2008) focused on guild dynamics within the *World of WarCraft* (*WoW*). The researchers used the *WoW* user interface to collect data on in-game player activities. After gathering data for 641,805 avatars on 62 Taiwanese *WoW* game servers, Chen et al., (2008) created five guild type categories that have different meanings in terms of in-game group dynamics.