

Playing ‘for Real’: A Lab-Based Study of MMOGs

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Abstract

In this paper we report on a 3-year, mixed-methods study of Massively Multiplayer Online games, focusing on the ways in which our lab-based studies were indeed sites of ‘real’ play, notwithstanding their limited ecological validity (Williams, 2010). We document the ways in which we observed players’ real commitment to a play session that had few or no opportunities for follow up – investing considerable time and attention to, for example, naming and customizing their avatars, and selectively equipping them. We illustrate here some of the insights available through lab-based play that cannot be captured otherwise. We also draw attention to the ways in which relying on only one type of data can create a false and/or incomplete picture of a participant’s level of engagement with the game. This research suggests that labs might well be a site where ‘authentic’ play is indeed possible, and can therefore offer rich potential for MMOG research as they can give significantly greater context than is possible from data that is generated by game servers.

Keywords

MMOGs, Mixed Methods Research, Actor Network Theory

Description of Research

This study began with a reasonably clear, passably intelligible question: what can an examination of virtual world (VW) avatars and activities tell us about their ‘real world’ counterparts’ identities and behaviours? A three year study, the work involved a multi-disciplinary team that examined and analyzed phenomena in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) such as leaders and leadership (Harvey & Ferguson, 2012), sex and gender (Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2012), the interpersonal dynamics of players, spoken and written language forms and functions, the fidelity of avatar to player appearance, and the developmental trajectory by which players evolve from ‘novices’ to ‘experts’ in MMOGs (Taylor et al., 2011; Bergstrom 2012). Unlike a great deal of the quantitative work on players to date that focuses on what can be captured by server data or by automated scripts that collect player-based data, for example from the WoW Armory (Lewis & Wardrip-Fruin, 2010; Yee et al., 2011) our work was very much focused on what could be learned from players who are in full view of the researchers in lab settings playing in an MMOG (*Rift*). In total, over 150 players participated in the research we will describe in this paper, conducted in research laboratories in two locations in Canada. All participants played in *Rift* for at least 45 minutes and up to four hours, in that case in multiple play sessions. In this paper, we focus on how, despite the fact that participants were playing in a laboratory fully observed by researchers during their play sessions, the majority of participants played as if ‘for real’. That is, even though they were playing on an account that they would likely only play on once (or a few times if they chose to come back to the lab), they often treated the play sessions very seriously, taking considerable time, for instance to choose the names of their avatars, or to painstakingly customize them, to equip their characters, buy and sell items and level up in the game. We conclude by illustrating findings we were able to arrive at from such closely watched play that would not be possible to access using data captured ‘at a distance’.

Methods

Both in scope and in its methods, this is the first study of its kind: an “on the ground” examination of the complex relationships between VWs and the localized practices of players in different cities, and in different contexts of play. The theoretical framework we deployed was Actor Network Theory

(ANT), as developed and articulated in the field of Science and Technology Studies by Bruno Latour (1987, 1992, 2005), John Law (2004) and Michel Callon (1995). ANT reads ‘the social’ – institutions, practices, and interactions – as the product of engagement and associations between human and non-human ‘actors’. As Latour insists in *Reassembling the Social* (2005), agency is distributed across actors that co-constitute a network. Non-humans, including artifacts, technologies, and other animals, are not simply the ‘backdrop’ to social interactions; in this view, human action is shaped and made possible by non-human agents, to which have been delegated the task of prescribing, framing, eliciting, and enabling certain forms of action, and prohibiting or discouraging others. The work of sociology, from an ANT perspective, is therefore to “re-assemble” the associations between human and non-human actors in a network so as to better map the relationships between and among them.

To that end, data collection included a survey of player demographics and expertise, screen captured play that was synched to audio and video recordings of players as they played, keystroke and mouse data, interviews with players, observations, field notes, and a detailed logging of completed quests, gear equipped and gold totals--and explicit attention to the lab setting on the ways participants played. We compiled in this way detailed screen recordings of players as they chose their avatar, customized and named it, and recordings of all of their in game play. In this paper we demonstrate the ways in which we were surprised by participants: by the time that they took to set up their avatars, the time they took naming that avatar, and time and energy they exerted in ‘really’ playing the game.

Discussion

This paper draws attention to the ways that relying on only one metric can create a false and/or incomplete picture of a participant’s *level* and *kind* of engagement with the game. For example, when looking at the keylogging data of a particular participant who had self-identified as an expert MMOG player, we observed very little movement using the WADS keys on their keyboard (see Taylor et al. (2011) for further discussion of the use of keyboard usage as a marker of expertise). Additionally, when inspecting their inventory at the end of their final session, very little in-game wealth had been collected over the course of their two multi-hour visits to the lab. While the number of key presses and wealth accumulation are two fairly reliable measures by which we could assess most of our participants’ expertise – in this case the participant falls in line with patterns of key presses and wealth accumulation frequently associated with novice play – it is only when the video recordings and research field notes were consulted that we got ‘the full picture’. We realized that while in-game metrics indicate that a participant’s avatar was idle or wandered aimlessly for much of their time spent in-game, these metrics did not capture the ‘backchannel’ where some of our apparently inexperienced participants were verbally explaining the basics of the game mechanics to their co-located participants. Observational data indicated that not only were such players well versed in the mechanics of a fantasy-based gameworld, they were experienced enough that they could provide detailed instructions to two first time *Rift* players.

Proponents of large scale data mapping argue for its advantages over the smaller scale studies, namely that studying a complete MMOG population means there is no risk of sampling bias, as all players are included in the sample, and that with data being collected at the server level, players are unaware that they are being studied, and so are less likely to change their behaviour than they might if they knew they were being observed by a researcher (Williams, 2010, 464–456). What we saw, by contrast, was how a limited a ‘snap shot’, context free approach to data collection would have led to inaccurate labeling of players. Instead we were able to identify highly skilled players who on the face of it looked as if they were novices (they had little gold or did not pick up items), but when fuller contextualization was possible, proved to be expert players who were mobilizing their expertise to assist other players, who were expert players in a different genre of game. What became apparent was that, notwithstanding the acknowledged ‘artificiality’ of lab-based gameplay studies, they prove to be a powerful and invaluable source of information about the complexity of levels and kinds of play that simply cannot be captured through server-side data capture, and alert us to the value of alternative methodologies, in particular the importance of specifying the relations of methods to outcomes,

closely attending both to what is clarified and what is obscured by the ‘actor network’ through which we carry out our investigations.

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