Protecting Face in Virtual Life: An Ethnographic Analysis of Identity Categories and Informal Systems of Social Control in Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds

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ABSTRACT

The growth of the digital gaming has led to new opportunities in observing and understanding human interaction. Through a focus upon the interactions of individuals in online worlds, this dissertation proposal is intended to expand methods and theory as they approach leadership and identity in online virtual worlds such as EVE Online and World of Warcraft.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Sociology

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General - Games

General Terms

Management, Design, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Identity, Social Control, Online Interaction, Massively Multiplayer Online games, Ethnography, Ethnomethodology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online virtual worlds, most notably Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, have been a market and social phenomenon that has experienced striking growth in the last decade. Memberships in MMO game worlds lies in the tens of millions, with thousands of individual users concurrently occupying virtual space and interacting in sociological interesting ways. The online sphere has been a focus of a number of different studies, focusing primarily on the demographics, the nature of interactions, and the different forms of leadership and organizations that occur in virtual space. These studies have often analyzed the actions of individuals online through connections to the individual that exists in the standard (or "real") world. By linking these different spheres, there is a tendency in sociological research to approach the leadership roles of individuals through data linking their actions to other parts of their reality, often trying to find standard world explanations for virtual-world phenomena. The social reality of the MMO player does not, however, translate directly and simply between the two realms, and as seen with most ethnographic studies, a focus on one social space is the only way to get a true

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sense on the nature of interactions in the social context. Ethnographic and ethnomethodological works operate through observing social action in context, and by sticking directly within observable data. It is this quality that allows for a grounded and data-driven analysis. With this understanding, the purpose of this dissertation would be to perform a comprehensive study of interactions in large online organizations in MMO games, and to use this information to delve into the different ways in which the unique nature of online interaction impacts sociological concepts such as identity, categorization, organization, and systems of social control. Most importantly, this research will focus on the communications between leaders and their social groups, and any informal systems of social control that are used to maintain order in an otherwise anonymous and potentially chaotic social context.

The goal of this project is to act as a participant observer in a few online "guilds," and, with permission, record communication data and take notes on the events happening in-game. After the initial ethnographic portion, a more focused observation on particularly effective and ineffective guilds and the way the leaders define and share categories to the members will be undertaken during the second year. This will also include a series of in-depth interviews with guild members and leaders on the way they experience their social world online, as well as the categories and social control mechanisms they experience. Finally, in the third year, it is expected that an ethnomethodological analysis of the collected data will bring important categories to light and show how the communal use of these categories acts as an informal system of social control.

While the particular research area of the virtual world is still relatively new, a growing number of researchers have attempted to observe the virtual world. These pursuits have come from multiple directions. One direction for early works focused on the virtual economy [3][10] or on the demographics and qualities of the player [4][11][9], albeit without specifically addressing language and interaction. On the other hand, there have been extensive ethnographies on virtual communities and groups in digital games [1]. These works give a rich insight of their research areas, but they do not connect closely to the development of sociological theory, primarily due to the anthropological roots of the research system. This research rests in between these areas, where a sociological analysis is made of digital gaming. Currently, these research projects focus on the business side and the organizational side of the gaming experience, as opposed to the experience of the character inside the game [8]. For this dissertation, the focus will be on the methods used by individuals to create and protect face in an online world, as discussed in Goffman's [6] dramaturgical theory.

The sociological significance of this project is two-fold. First, it would be an exercise in applying ethnomethodological and

categorization analysis methodologies to the online world. The goal would be to perform the study entirely through the character that exists in the virtual world, as that is the social setting in which they experience social phenomena. Such application has not been undertaken to date, but the given the primarily textual nature of communication online would be powerful in opening up new avenues for research in the future. Such a process was done by Tom Boellstorff [1] when he did an ethnography of Second Life entirely within the game context. This method was the best and most accurate means to observe culture, but in order to study categories and social control, a different methodology is required, and it is one goal of this project to show that ethnomethodology is an effective way of doing this.

The second contribution of this project is the insight that it would give into the interactional processes that underlay the informal control mechanisms that cause social order to exist. The online world is different from the standard world due to its limited forms of interaction, but at the same time, it is very much similar to the standard world in the relationships that form. When language is a central means of interaction the use of categories to create and maintain a moral order becomes central for social control. This study, by focusing on the language and interactions of players in guild (organization) contexts will show how leaders acquire leadership roles, how they form categories and how (and why) they apply them to others. The use of categories in social control is sociologically relevant because it is generalizable to the standard world, or any context in which language plays a key role in determining informal sanctions as a means of social control.

Another purpose this project has that would allow it to expand sociological theory is its ability to expand understanding of the connection between organizations and the individual's sense-making. When linking a sense of identity and an organization, it may be very difficult to figure out what is relevant in the standard world. In the online context, however, many external factors can be removed, because the social world of the character online rests almost entirely in his organization, if he is participating in large-scale goal-oriented guilds. As such, this project would be able to connect the ways in which organizations affect the categories we use to view the world. Putting this together with the previous points, this project would be able to shed insight into how language is used by leaders and organizational structures in order to control others' actions, and potentially even their sense of self.

The primary means of data gathering for this project would be an extensive participant observation process that would begin very early in the project. While gaining access into some of these organizations can be very difficult, I have had the luck of participating in significantly-sized guilds in numerous Massively Multiplayer Online games in the past. Because of my experience I have the insider knowledge that would allow me to build connections and gather data that is relevant (decipher event-specific jargon in fight discussions, for instance). As mentioned previously, in order to keep the data entirely in-context, no standard world information will be asked for, but if it is mentioned (such as a mention of cooking for one's children) it will be noted.

The largest source of data will be chat logs that are gathered during the course of the study. Due to the eventual thousands of pages of text that will occur during the course of the study, key points and phrases will be referenced and tracked during the course of the study. Additionally, field notes will be used for gathering other context-related notes in addition to the text itself. There may be times when Voice over IP systems are used, such as Ventrilo or TeamSpeak. With permission, some of these discussions will be recorded and transcribed as well.

To analyze this data, a modified form of Grounded Theory [2] will be used. Theory generation will be the goal of the project and performed in an ongoing manner. The method of analyzing data will be based off of ethnomethodological [5] and categorization analysis [7] methods.

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