

MMORPG: a review of social studies

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Abstract

In this paper, once introduced what MMORPGs are and why they are relevant for social research, I will proceed reviewing sociological literature about this topic. After stressing the various methods used in the study of MMORPG-related social issues, and the various theoretical foundations those researches are based upon, I will conclude stressing the need for the developing of studies about italian MMORPG players.

Introduction

The acronym MMORPG stands for Massive Multiplayer Online Role Play Game. It's a kind of videogame, functioning with client programs running on various player's computers - remotely connecting with centralized servers. Players interact in the common context of a simulated world, every one with his own character, every character symbolized by a graphical depiction: an avatar. Simulated worlds are persistent and intersubjective: the pluralità of players and the common virtual world where their interactions take place are the essential elements of MMORPGs. Additional elements, variable according to the game, make the gamer's experience more significative and captivating. Characters can usually evolve, improving their abilities (with progression methods similar to those used in classic role play games); they can commerce bartering items or using virtual currency, they can fight, chat with other characters – corresponding to other human players or to artificial intelligences¹. In different MMORPGs a player can or cannot know when other particular players are online, can or cannot open direct and private communication channels with them. It's clear that different game design choices about similar topics can lead to very different gaming experiences, even for games with similar graphic rendering².

¹ Usually defined NPCs, Non Playing Characters.

² For a paper showing how different game designs can afflict the structuring of in-game communities: Koivisto, 2003.

MMORPGs are a relatively recent kind of videogame: the first using a graphical interface, “Neverwinter Nights”³, was released in 1991. The genre reached full development and huge success in 1997 with “Ultima Online” (based upon a well-known series of single player role play game for personal computers). In 1999 were released both “EverQuest”, now a Sony Online Entertainment product, and “Asheron’s Call”, a Microsoft game: the interest of such giants of entertainment shows the really massive dimension quickly reached by MMORPGs, and the prospects of high profitability for producers.

The convergence of text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and single player role play games characterized the development of MMORPGs; they usually display a full 3d or isometric graphic, and a setting related to fantasy genre (with fewer examples of sci-fi settings).

Many video-games producers are investing considerable resources in developing of new MMORPGs and in the maintenance of existing ones, for several reasons: pay-per-play subscriptions are a revenue font during the entire life-cycle of the game, a font that can’t be found in classical videogames; server-side authentication allows to exclude from the game pirated copies of the client program; the game’s life cycle is potentially lengthened by fidelization mechanisms, derived from the structuring of social relations between players.

Publications: methods and methodologies

Various social researchers are conducting studies about MMORPGs, and many scientific publications are already available. International conferences on videogames-related social studies, or about digital world in a broader sense, are often accepting papers on this topic. The Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) organized three international conferences: *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, Tampere in 2002, *Level Up Conference* in Utrecht, in 2003 and *Changing Views: World in Play* in Vancouver, 2005, with an increasing number of paper about MMORPGs. The *Center for Computer Games Research*, at IT University of Copenhagen, organized in 2004 the cross-disciplinary conference *Other Players*, entirely dedicated to multiplayer computer games, and several contribution were social researches about MMORPGs.

Between journals publishing with some regularity papers about this topic, it’s worth of note the multidisciplinary *Game Studies - the international journal of computer game research*.

Coming from some specific sociological branch, or being inscribable in the multidisciplinary context of game studies, social researches about MMORPGs can be divided between those mainly focusing on the player and the off-line world, and those focusing on the character and on-line social relations – obviously, both kind of studies usually start from a modelisation (often implicit) of the whole phenomenon in its complexity.

The first kind of research, the player-focused one, considers such topics as gender-, nationality-, age-related players approaches⁴, possible consequences in the “real world” of in-game related

³ This version of the game, playable only by America On Line (AOL) customers and dismissed in 1997, is not to be mistaken with a subsequent homonymous version released in 2002. Confirming the importance of classical role play games in the development of MMORPGs, Neverwinter Nights was based upon a set of rules derived by the popular Dungeons and Dragons.

⁴ A portuguese gamers community analysis in Gonçalves – Figueiredo, 2005.

phenomena: negative ones, as game addiction and cyber-crime⁵, or positive ones, as new political and social consciousness⁶ or the development of learning strategies⁷.

The second kind of research, the virtual-world focused one, studies topics as in-game social group structures⁸ (clan or guilds), *grief* play⁹, communicative techniques¹⁰, cooperation and trust¹¹, and motivation-based player categorizations¹². Few scientific papers deal in an explicit way with methodological issues, or problematize theoretical assumptions inspiring modelizations upon which researches are based¹³.

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods are used: analysing a wide review I found major use of content analysis, participant observation, individual and focus group interviews, and questionnaire-based survey.

Content analysis examines material coming from game developers – like official game manuals and regulations; and material coming from players and published outside the game, like the textual and graphical content of guilds' web sites, or forums where players exchange news and advice. Sean Lai¹⁴ conducted a peculiar kind of content analysis: in a research about archetypes and cultural values in U.S. and Taiwanese MMORPGs, he compared the typology and contents of in-game quests¹⁵ proposed to players from game developers (besides analyzing archetypes upon which in-game playing characters class or race subdivisions are based).

Individual interviews are conducted by many channels: those lead with the physical presence of the interviewed are a minority, while digital media like e-mails or instant messaging systems are prevalent. Focus group interviews are used in few, bigger sized researches; they are usually employed in early stages, for a better building of hypothesis, indicators and research tools.

Questionnaires - like interviews, mainly submitted via digital channels – are widely used. Digital questionnaire submission is usually done by email, or directing the participants to a web page where the survey is located. The later submission modality gives the respondent better privacy guarantee (given the researcher can ignore even his e-mail address) but on the other side it increases the risk of multiple respondents. It is to be noted the technical solution used by Alix¹⁶ and Goncalves-Figueiredo¹⁷: it's possible to exclude multiple respondents coming from

⁵ An analysis of MMORPG-related taiwanese cyber-crimes in Chen-Chen-Song-Korba, 2004.

⁶ See Konzack – Lindof, 2005.

⁷ See Ducheneaut – Moore, 2004; Galarneau, 2005.

⁸ See Fleming Seay – Jerome – Lee – Kraut, 2003.

⁹ About this phenomenon see Foo, 2004; Foo e Koivisto, 2004; Pargman – Erissson, 2005; a specific analysis of grief play among taiwanese players in Lin - Sun, 2005.

¹⁰ A study about interaction forms in Klasttrup, 2002..

¹¹ About trust, see Heide Smith, 2003; about cooperation, Lin – Sun – Tinn, 2003. A treatise about virtual world becoming public space in Hollan Oliver, 2002.

¹² Many studies about MMORPG players' taxonomies cite, often proposing variations, MUD's users quadripartition by Bartle, 1996. See Karlsen 2004, Yee, 2005, Alix 2005.

¹³ On the distinction between ludological and narratological approach, introduced by Frasca, 1999, see Juul 2001, Pearce 2002, Frasca 2003, Pearce 2005. An interesting attempt to draw ontological foundations for the virtual being in Salazar, 2005; an explicitly phenomenological theoretical foundation in Stoltz, 2004.

¹⁴ Lai, 2001.

¹⁵ Objective-oriented missions, completing which the player gets some kind of reward.

¹⁶ Alix, 2005

¹⁷ Goncalves – Figueiredo, 2005

same IP address¹⁸. This technical solution alone appears to be insufficient, because it doesn't solve the problem for frequent situations of dynamical IP – when service providers give dynamically different IP addresses to their customers for each session. Moreover, simply ignoring surveys coming from the same IP exposes the researcher to another serious risk: the risk to systematically exclude from taking part in the survey respondents connected to a net using NAT technology¹⁹, in Italy used by popular broadband provider Fastweb. Alix solves this by erasing only submissions with the same IP and same demographic values, but on the whole it appears preferable E-mail survey: it is not exposed to aforementioned risks, and it doesn't involve self-selection like a public web site does: moreover, with a self-selected sample it's difficult to quantify non-respondants, while the number and percentage of subjects invited to survey and that chose not to answer can be a relevant value by itself.

Between quantitative data analysis techniques, it's recognizable a considerable use of factorial analysis, with rare usage of multi-dimensional techniques like rotated component matrix²⁰. Noticeable the complete lack of fuzzy clustering techniques, and on a broader sense the lack of fuzzy set theory in the research model definition stage. Infinite truth values logic would be, in my opinion, very useful for researches which, based upon a multidimensional recursive modelization of the various nets of social relationships in which the player is interacting, consider relevant its multiple and simultaneous belonging, with different degrees of intensity, to different social groups on the same or on different reality levels.

Participant observation is a method especially suited for studying intertions happening in digitally-mediated MMORPG world, being absent many problems connected with its use in “real world” field researches (mainly, the distortion in social actor induced by the observer's presence). Being the social observer's avatar indistinguishable from that of any other player, the risk of distortions caused by its presence it's negligible; of course there are still other issues connectes with the scientific attitude teh researcher must keep²¹, given that many participant observers were MMORPGs players before starting the social research).

It must be emphasized the peculiar field observation technique, the ride along: the participation to game sessions alongside an expert player, one who knows about the researcher's role and the existence of a social research. Needing a big attention for the risk of being somehow misguided, even unwillingly, by the “expert player”, this kind of approach seems useful especially in early stages of the research, allowing to witness from a privileged viewpoint to interaction between high-level characters, with bigger experience, probably a sub-group reachable with bigger difficulties with simple participant observation.

The bigger part of reviewed social researches combines some of this research techniques; the need to investigate the study topic from different directions emerges from the widespread adoption of a multi-layer model of the phenomenon²²: the micro-level of the single player, the meso-level of players' social groups (guilds, clans) and the macro-level of the game world as a whole. This first structuration is crossed by the distinction between on-line virtual world and

¹⁸ Internet Protocol Address: identificative number, automatically associated to each computer connected to world wide web.

¹⁹ Network Address Translation: technology that give the very same IP address (or a limitate number of common IP address), with different logical ports, to every computer belonging to the same net. This technology is becoming widely used, due to the increment in internet subscribers while IP adresses are a limited number.

²⁰ Alix, 2005

²¹ About issues relative to the use of ethnographic methods in virtual world, see Beaulieu, 2004.

²² See Kolo – Baur, 2004; Salazar, 2005.

off-line real world; the interactions taking place in each sector of this model are subject to specific methods of research and data collection.

Conclusions

From this review of sociological papers about MMORPG emerges the picture of a fermenting scene, where scholars coming from different disciplines are using a plurality of approaches and methods. Italian scholars contribute and studies about italian MMORPG players are still scarce²³, and a better knowledge of this phenomenon by new sociological researches is to be hoped, given that MMORPGs participation is involving more and more people (mainly young one) also in Italy. The spreading of broadband web connections, indispensable for most online games, and the availability of flat commercial offering (allowing to stay connected with no time limitation) let suppose an eventual increase in the number of italian MMORPG players. Certainly, authorities devoted to young people's issues and new technologies can profit of the results of scientific researches that make a careful study of this new entertaining and socializing framework: researches devoid of groundless alarmism or preconceived optimism can throw light on peculiarities, opportunities and risks connected with this games' usage.

Moreover, like several economic scholars pointed out, MMORPG can be used like some kind of *in vitro* environment, where to observe growing and evolving of phenomena that present bigger difficulty of observation in the "real world", being connected to a bigger number of variables: in this sense are typical economical studies about inflation or deflation in virtual economies. Similarly, the narrower number of channels used for communication in MMORPG if compared to real-world ones, the presence of a form of simulated spaciality (absent in other virtual communication media like chats and bulletin boards) allows social researcher interested in some communicative phenomenon to verify or falsify its hypothesis also with MMORPG-based researches. This way, complex models of social relations and nets, based on recursive non-linear schemes derived from chaos theory, in my opinion can be especially adequate to this peculiar field of research, so precariously posed between real and virtual.

²³ Similar reflections about MMORPG-related german scientific production in Kolo – Baur, 2004.

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