

## **World of Warcraft as a playground for sociological research**

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MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) raised, since they moved on the scene as a mass-phenomena, many sociological questions. From how players construct their online identity to how virtual economies interact with traditional economic systems, a wide range of issues have been investigated in order to understand how these environments would impact on the relationship between single persons, groups and society. Besides being a challenge from the theoretical point of view MMOs are still a challenge on the methodological aspect. Many well-known and tested research methods have been adapted to the whole new research environments of digital worlds (Hine 2000) and some new and promising methods are emerging. This paper will briefly introduce sociological research topics and methodologies that have been investigated in MMOs focusing on a specific, and not so widespread, methodology: game log-analysis.

The main sociological topic of interest in MMOs is the emergence, within these digital environments, of specific in-game cultures (Taylor 2007). Cultural forms, practices and synchronized behaviours emerge from the perpetual interaction between game design and players attempt to achieve personal goals: between rules (that formalize how something should be done) and players creativity (that uses and tweaks the game world). Even if this process emerges as a major aspect when players try to sneak through game rules in order to gain personal advantage (Cheating can then be seen as an emergent cultural practice within the game (Consalvo 2007) ), this process is continuous and occurs during the everyday game experience. Michel de Certeau introduced a conceptual opposition between strategy and tactics (de Certeau 2002) that can be viable to explain this phenomenon. De Certeau's theory has been originally thought for physical spaces but games (and even more MMOs) can surely be described in spatial terms (Nakamura, Wirman 2005) and often "playing a game" it is a matter of moving through (digital) spaces. By strategy, in MMOs, I mean the game world as it has been designed, as a formal set of rules, limits and possibilities. By tactics, on the other hand, I mean the everyday actions of every single player done to develop the character, to carry on on-line social relationships or to pursue his/her own goals. Strategy is the place and the rules where tactical movements happen:

"The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. [...] But these tactics introduce a Brownian movement into the system. They also show the extent to which intelligence is inseparable from the everyday struggles and pleasures that it articulates.

Strategies, in contrast, conceal beneath objective calculation their connection with the power that sustain them from within the stronghold of its own “proper” place or institution.” (De Certeau 2002)

The Brownian movement produced by players leads toward the emergence of a specific game-related sub culture that can heavily impact in players everyday life. Within its stronghold game design cannot really be changed by tactical playing but on a first time game design offers the borders where tactical play can occur and on a second time tactical play can provide some tips and suggestions about how to change and improve game design. This movable border of strategy makes tactical practices produce unstable and rather interesting emerging culture that reserve many interesting research aspect for social sciences and digital humanities. While an excellent examination of game studies approaches has already been done (Mortensen 2007) I’ll try to observe how social sciences can use MMOs by moving the focus away from the game itself (that is *only* the space where social interactions occur) to the social structures that emerge within the MMO and how those interact with the society. Social relationships can be observed in three different levels: a) within the MMO, b) outside of the MMO but related to the MMO itself, c) and observing how what happens inside MMOs impact with other social system such as the economic system, the juridical system the moral of society etc. Many of these aspects are obviously studied also by games studies as a branch of humanities, but the three level approach is heavily rooted in the sociological tradition.

### **Micro, meso, macro and methodologies: again.**

It seems that even when it moves in a brand new and unexplored landscape such as MMOs, a sociological approach cannot really exist without the distinction between micro, meso and macro level of analysis. Applying those three level to MMOs research will result in:

*Micro sociology of MMOs:* mainly concerned with the everyday social interaction within digital environment. How players deal with the game, how they manage their online relationships, how they deal with conflicts or fun, these are all research topics of a micro sociology of MMOs.

*Meso sociology of MMOs:* it will focus on low-level social structure that can arise from a single MMO. From group of players to fan communities, MMOs (as videogames) seem able to generate a number of “out-of-the-game” products that can enhance or radically change the game experience. Observing database web sites such as Thottbot<sup>1</sup> or Allakhazam<sup>2</sup> it means observing a large and active fan community that collaborate to collect and share valuable information about the game:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thottbot.com>

<sup>2</sup> <http://wow.allakhazam.com>

how you can find a specific object, how to solve a quest etc. On one side this is surely changing the way the game is meant to be played (by making it easier) but on the other side it brings the player right in the middle of a large community that can add more value to the whole game experience.

*Macro sociology of MMOs*: mainly concerned with how MMOs, as a whole, impact with different social structures and systems. The impact of goldfarming and real money trade on economical and juridical system are a typical example of this research perspective (Castronova 2005). Often also ethical questions are investigated within this research perspective like the juridical status of virtual marriage or how to deal with violence or sexuality when it happens in a virtual environment. Obviously the macro approach to these questions won't observe the player perception but will speculate about how policy makers and legislators should act.

If sociological approach moved in MMOs his own whole set of distinctions and differences about research perspective it moved also research methods. The distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods it is still up and running (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee and Nickell 2006) even if both had to adjust something to the new environment and are often mixed in larger researches (Steinkuehler, Williams 2006).

### **Digital research for digital environments**

Ethnography (Virtual), in depth semi-structured interviews, and large surveys are always available in MMO sociological research toolbox. At the same time, during the last few years, a rather different methodological approach emerged not to replace existing methodologies but to integrate them with something that it is possible only in the digital environment of MMOs: game-log analysis. In a MMO, as in every single virtual world and in many online places, everything is recorded and stored in a simple text file called log file. The quantity and the quality of the stored information obviously depends on the MMO platform but usually every single event, or word, done or said in a specific server is stored (Poole, Contractor, Williams, Srinivastava, 2008). This huge amount of data opens endless possibilities for in-game social research and unveils some fears. If everything is logged this means that every single game action is available to be analyzed in an aggregated form. From grouping strategies or players centrality in social networks (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee and Nickell 2006) to preferred paths in the virtual world everything can be observed on a single player level or congregated. At the same time, if conversations are also stored in log files, this can produce an amount of data that no chatlogger in the world can reach. One of the most interesting aspect of this kind of data is an unprecedented

level of spontaneity that assures a high qualitative value nearby to the value obtained with participant observations. Log analysis observes players while they play in the most natural context. They are not answering a survey not are being interviewed by a researcher; they are just moving and playing as they usually do. Of course deep player's motivations are unavailable to log analysis but at the same time log analysis has the capability to investigate, if adequately supported by computing power, very large samples of players population (samples that can even coincide with the server population itself). Using again de Certeau's opposition between tactics and strategies that I introduced in the opening part of the paper, log analysis can be able to observe some of the tactical behaviours in real time without being forced to interview any player. At the same time it would be possible to observe how different game tactics or social behaviours spread within the MMO environment. But what kind of social research can be done in MMOs with this methodology? It mostly depends on how detailed are the data logged by the MMO servers and how they are structured. On a speculative level it is suggest some hypothetical research that should to be verified if viable for every single virtual environment. As a preliminary proposal for discussion I'll suggest two researchs using as background MMO *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004).

*Spatial experience of the world:* MMOs usually provides spaces to move through, cities to visit and areas to explore. Often spaces are thought with a specific kind of player in mind: the entry area for the newbies, many more middle-experience areas for more experienced players and some area for hardcore or very dedicated players. This seems to be true for every MMOs but it is even more evident if we focus our attention to MMORPGs like World of Warcraft (WoW) that provides different game area for every level range. There the experience of the world is strategically planned by Blizzard in order to offer a specific kind of game experience<sup>3</sup>. But what players really do? How they choose to move in the space? Are they acting according to Blizzard suggestion or they are moving into high level area to gain more experience for every kill? And what happens to the use of space when players reach the cap level and they don't have to fear to step into a "wrong area" by mistake? Obviously an automated analysis won't answer the question "what's the meaning that the player X gives to choosing that way instead of the other one?" but it can provide some useful aggregated data about where and when players spend their time, the role that social relationship have in the spatial presence (is people moving to level area lower than their characters just to help friends?) and suggest some interesting question for further researches.

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to underline that this strategic planning can be done observing previously done choices and mistakes. In the upcoming WoW expansion, called *The Wrath of the Lich King* there will be two autonomous starting area, for characters above level 68, to solve some problems encountered with the previous expansion (*The Burning Crusade*) that had a single starting area.

*Spread of knowledge:* Playing a MMO required a high amount of knowledge. Many concepts, facts and mechanisms have to be learnt and most of these are rather complex. Being able to set the best “talent tree” for a wow character or learning the right sequence of coordinated actions required to kill a specific boss in a raid instance are not minor skills<sup>4</sup>. All this knowledge spreads into the game in a relatively fast way using both in-game and off-game channels. While off-game channels of knowledge sharing (web sites like Allakhazam, or official WoW forums) can be described as part of a fan-based participatory culture (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, Robinson, 2006) the in-game spread of knowledge is based on a rather complex mechanism that involved word to mouth between friends, peer-support, social networking and casual conversation. By being able to track down how specific player knowledge becomes shared knowledge could be done with log-analysis by tracing in-game activities of the first “carrier” of specific information and his actions and conversations. In this way it would be possible to reconstruct the path of a specific information within the MMO and start evaluating which factors are involved in the process.

The proposed research streams are just intended to show the possibilities of game-log analysis both as a research tool itself and as a tool able to provide useful data to structure further in depth researches.

Beside these interesting research perspectives this methodology raises also some concerns on two different levels: player’s privacy and the role of theory. Players’ privacy is obviously a big issue that MMO producers are already facing. Blizzard seems to make a clear distinction between players’ privacy and characters privacy. Every information related to a World of Warcraft character is publicly available through a web site called The Armory<sup>5</sup> that allows anyone to browse characters, their equipments, their skills and many others information. At the same time player’s privacy is granted by making impossible to connect a single character to the player’s account and personal information. This kind of solution, even if it is far from being perfect, has been chose also by Sony Inc for a large game-log analysis of its MMO Everquest II (Poole, Contractor, Williams, Srinivastava, 2008). The second issue that log-analysis based research rises is related to the role of theory in game studies and in digital humanities. Log-analysis can be saw as a part of what Anderson calls the scientific approach in the petabyte age (Anderson 2008). Massive computational power and huge amount of data seem to shift scientific approach from a theory based model, where theory comes first and then it have to be confirmed or falsified by experimental researches, toward a correlation based model that just aim to describe what is happening “just in time”. If log-analysis researches and similar methodologies will lead undoubtedly to a science with no theory is still an

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<sup>4</sup> Just to have an idea of the global amount of knowledge related to a MMO like World of Warcraft: Wowwiki, the user generated wiki about the game and the game world counts at the moment more than 57,000 articles.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wowarmory.com>

open question but it should alert every researcher to remind that correlation is not causation and that large amount of statistical evidences are more viable to be a perfect base for theoretical hypothesis that to be theory themselves.

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