

Chapter 53

Norms, Practices, and Rules of Virtual Community of Online Gamers: Applying the Institutional Theoretical Lens

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author addresses a key question rooted in an institutional perspective: What norms, practices, and rules are evident in online gaming that facilitates the development of a virtual community of online gamers? Available studies have so far examined the institutional influences on organizations but not on virtual community. Thus, there is a compelling need to bridge fields such as IS and sociology in order to understand virtual communities of online gamers. The chapter comprises five sections: (1) examination of online gamers as an example of a virtual community; (2) brief description of institutional theory to illustrate the theoretical lens applied; (3) presentation of the methodology of the study; (4) discussion of the findings based on four different aspects: social roles and social positions, interaction rules, social control systems, and leadership; and finally (5) presentation of some implications and suggestion of future directions for study of the rapidly-growing phenomenon of online gaming.

1. INTRODUCTION

The astonishing growth of online gaming is largely due to the advancement of computer mediated communication (CMC). A report by ABI Research (Hinkle, 2006) estimated that by the year 2011, people would be downloading games on consoles worth up to \$3.8 billion. Documenting the overwhelming number of online gamers, it has been reported that the number of Internet

users around the world in 2010 is approximately 2 billion, with the Asian region ranked at the top (approximately 825.1 million users), followed by Europe (approximately 475.1 million) and North America (approximately 266.2 million) (Internet World Statistics, 2010). With such rapid growth, people in the ‘virtual’ world will continue to intensify their usage and engage in social networking. Virtual worlds are comprised of individuals, global virtual teams, and virtual communities work-

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ing across organizations. Online gaming breeds virtual communities in which more and more people across the world are using the Internet as a ubiquitous CMC tool to collaborate, socialize, and communicate in the virtual space. Moreover, online gamers come from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, education, nationality, and many others.

A virtual community creates spaces for people to collaborate at a distance. It is a new social as well as professional 'life form' surfacing from the Internet and CMC (Stolterman, Agren, & Croon, 1999). A virtual community is also conceptualized as a social entity wherein people relate to one another by the use of a specific technology (Rheingold, 1993; Jones, 1995; Schuler, 1996). There are several types of virtual community: the virtual community of relationship, of memory, of fantasy, of mind/interest, and of transaction (Bellah, 1985; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Kowch & Schwier 1997). All types of virtual community share a common characteristic: the existence of a group of people whose interactions are facilitated by various forms of CMC.

Today there are hundreds of online games on the market and hundreds more in the testing and development phase. Social science research has typically examined the impacts of these games on people's behaviors and attitudes, with many studies focusing on the potential negative aspects of game play (e.g. aggression and violence) (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003). Yet a basic understanding of the institutionalization process for online gamers is still under-researched and under-theorized. This may explain why studies on the impacts of game play have produced inconsistent findings (Williams, 2003). Hence, the main purpose of this chapter is to present a study that was carried out to address the following key question: What norms, practices, and rules are evident in the online gaming facilitate the development of virtual community of online gamers? The outline of the chapter is as follows. First, a brief introduction of the phenomenon is presented.

Second, the institutional theory used in the study is briefly explained. Next, the methodology used in the study is outlined. Fourth, the findings are discussed with respect to four key elements of the institutionalization process. Lastly, the chapter concludes with some remarks on the implications of the study as well as the research agenda for the future.

2. APPLYING THE INSTITUTIONAL LENS TO UNDERSTAND NORMS, PRACTICES, AND RULES OF THE GAMES

This section aims at introducing the theoretical lens used in understanding the online gamers' behaviors that exemplify the norms, practices and rules through the institutionalization process. It is clearly established that the institutional approach to organizations examines the social process by which organizational norms, practices, rules, and conventions acquire taken for granted status to affect the social behavior of social actors – individuals and groups. DiMaggio and Powell (1991a) emphasize the institutional approach as "...the ways in which action is structured and order made possible by shared systems of rules that both constrain the inclination and capacity of actors to optimize as well as privilege some groups whose interests are secured by prevailing rewards and sanctions" (p.11). Institutional theory is concerned with the constraints and enablement faced by social actors in organizations. As an approach to the study of organizations as social worlds, institutional theory has proven powerful in describing how institutions affect the actors and vice versa. Therefore, I have chosen this theoretical lens to investigate the norms, practices, and rules of online gaming because such lens provide crucial basis of understanding in such a way that:

- It acknowledges that reality is socially constructed;

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