

Chapter 21

Online Playability: The Social Dimension to the Virtual World

Ricardo Gouveia Rodrigues

NECE – University of Beira Interior, Portugal

Paulo Gonçalves Pinheiro

NECE – University of Beira Interior, Portugal

José Barbosa

Instituto da Segurança Social Centro Distrital de Aveiro, Portugal

ABSTRACT

A growing phenomenon of increasingly high importance, online gaming generates some of the Internet's most popular and profitable content and has also experienced exponential growth in recent years. The relevance of this issue and the relative lack of research available both consolidate the appropriateness of this theme. The social mechanism to MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) is perceived as both key to their attractiveness and a factor of differentiation in their success with corresponding attention to how game design can enhance this facet. Thus, this research aims to understand how the social mechanism present in MMOGs takes precedent over the range of pre-defined player objectives and play a key role in this type of game. For this purpose, two interviews were applied to two different publics: first, fifteen interviews were held with fifteen players of the MMOG Travian, with the second an interview with the game's management in order to gather information both from those playing and those providing the game. The interviews were then analyzed using content analysis. It was found that the social mechanism overrides the achievement of goals by players and that it is acknowledged, harnessed, and strengthened by the management as a key factor in the success of Travian.

INTRODUCTION

In parallel with the increase in the range of online gaming services came countless functionalities designed to “capture” players and ensure they spend the greatest possible time on the respective

sites. However, there has been very little academic research targeting the reasons gamers choose one particular game over another or the functions and characteristics driving gamers to spend longer periods of time engaged in a specific game.

Gaming represents one of the most popular online forms of content and where a person does

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0149-9.ch021

not only play against the computer but also with and against other people connected via the Internet (Gorritz, 2000; Vaughan, 1997). One study on Internet utilisation showed that users spend an average of 20 hours per week on the Internet for personal usage of which 48% is for online games (Pastore, 1999)

Numerous techniques and resources have been deployed to ensure gamers return time after time and creating an ever greater degree of addiction (KESA, 2002). Research related with the length of time spent playing might provide significant implications for client loyalty and companies with online businesses, in general. These firms need to ensure that clients visit their sites repeatedly given that it is the total number and incidence of hits on a site that determines its value (Rose, Khoo & Straub, 1999). Should no client be interested in again visiting the site, then its commercial value plummets despite its input of technical and management resources.

As regards the loyalty factor, companies with online games businesses have proven fairly successful given that their clientele does display loyalty and even to the extent of what might be perceived as addiction to the game (Lewinski, 2000).

However, despite the high potential of online games and the sheer range of technical capacities and features deployed, there has been little academic study of the techniques that most influence online gaming (Quam, 1998; Rosenzweig, 2000). The limitations of studies carried out on online gaming may be classified into three groups. First, the majority of studies do not provide either conceptual or theoretical frameworks. Secondly, the majority of these studies do not provide empirical validation of their thesis. Finally, previous studies have not established a relationship between the conceptual factors and the design characteristics. Therefore, even while knowing that the concepts are important to boosting the reproduction of the game, we do not know how to apply the design concepts to online games in practice. Conse-

quently, the majority of online games have made recourse to a fairly costly set of techniques with only a few proving able to generate client loyalty (KESA, 2002).

Nevertheless, higher profile research on the field of online gaming has sought to capture that which is recognised by both producers and players as the key factor responsible for the success of these games – socialisation. According to a study carried out by Griffiths & Davies (2003), one in every five gamers prefers to socialise online when compared with real life. According to the findings of these authors, players affirmed that they perceive a major source of satisfaction and pleasure in virtual environments, especially in games that promote equality among the gaming community.

According to their 2003 research, 81% of online gamers are male with an average age of 28 and spending an average of 70 hours per week on gaming. Analysis undertaken by Yee (2006) revealed similar data backing up the results of the aforementioned authors.

MMOGS AND ONLINE GAMER MOTIVATIONS

Daily, millions of people engage in interaction in virtual environments known as Massively-Multi-player Online Games (MMOGs). Following the launch of Multi-user Dungeons (MUDs) emerged what are now known as MMOGs (Christofoloi, 2006) where the most noticeable difference derives from the latter featuring a more evolved concept than their predecessors in addition to the fact that they have proven able to attract the attention of literally millions of gamers and harness them through a variety of activities and experiences as well as through the interaction with other gamers and objects incorporated into the online world (Yee, 2006) with such interaction essential to gaming success (Galarneau, 2005; Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). Taking into consideration this availability of games to a mass market of gamers,

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