Virtual Role-Playing Communities, “Wold” and World

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of online role-playing games, and the virtual communities they create, are attracting much attention from business and academics. These virtual communities and environments provide invaluable opportunities for researchers to investigate various social and psychological aspects and issues. In this short article, we would like to share our views on some of these issues and opportunities in establishing a community identity with various virtual and real aspects, and transferring knowledge between these two aspects.

BACKGROUND

A fantasy role-playing game is one which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment. (Lortz, 1979, p. 36). Gaming fantasy combines the expressive freedom of fantasy with the structure characteristics of games. Fantasy role-playing gamers, the party of players and game masters, create their own cultural systems, generating identities and meanings in complex social worlds (Fine, 2002).

Online role-playing games have developed entire virtual worlds and communities with a sense of purpose, a shared history, and complex social interactions (Powasek, 2001; Murray, 2004). While the primary purpose of these (online) gaming communities is to have fun, nestled within them are important social and psychological phenomena such as identity construction, storytelling, learning, leadership, cooperation, and competition, which can/should be seen from the viewpoint of communities of practice. Moreover, phenomena emerging in these online communities can also be investigated almost entirely by unconventional online research methods. For example, our work on the Woldian games includes participation as an online member and the use of entirely information and communication technology (ICT) tools to research the emergence of interesting phenomena in the community.

The fantasy world of Wold, which began as a homemade local campaign in 1985, now has become an online community with almost 100 active members, who asynchronously interact with each other by posting on various boards for gaming and chatting within the community Web site, www.woldiangames.com. By paying the utmost attention to maintaining its free and volunteer nature, blending veteran players with new recruits, the Woldian world has achieved a lot as a community. When the life companion of one member passed away, an hour of silence was conducted on the players’ chatting board to show their grief. The Woldian world also has made good use of its online environment by archiving all the games and chats, and providing virtual facilities for learning, research, and development.

Online fantasy role-playing communities like Woldian games present interestingly complex cases in the sense that they are build upon three different dimensions: (1) the real world, (2) a fantasy world, and (3) an online, virtual world, which blend with each other in an interesting manner. Even the term “virtual” means the mental/fantasy and the online/computerized aspect together. While both the fantasy and virtual world would share the common denominator of non-reality, the online dimension provides the environment that makes this mixing of reality and non-reality possible in an unprecedented way. The various types of knowledge transfer in the form of identity and experience that occur between
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