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**Can we apply Anthony Giddens' (1984)
stratification model of the agent to specify
player agency in Massively Multiplayer
Online Games?**

Dissertation

By

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Abstract

Through the application of Anthony Giddens' action model of the purposive agent as it appears in his social theory of structuration, to the player action in massively multiplayer online games, the thesis demonstrates the emergence of agency out of intentional and reflexively monitored actions within a social game experience and reliance of this agency to the structure of multiplayer online games designed to accommodate game experience for many players. It analyses the change in the notion of agency from traditional single player games, with the increased social role of the player supporting the appropriateness of a social action perspective by giving evidences from the characteristics of perpetual multiplayer game worlds.

Keywords: agency, MMORPG, structuration, social action, MUD

Abbreviations

MMOG: Massively Multiplayer Online Game

MMORPG: Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game

NPC: Non-Player Character (character controlled by program)

PK: Player Kill

PvP: Player versus player

Introduction

The emphasis in the last few decades on single-player computer and video games is something of an anomaly in the eons-old history of gaming. While there are notable exceptions, such as solitaire card games, by and large over the centuries games have been valued as social experiences, as a way for people to relate to each other, as a way for people to play together. The fact that digital games are swinging back to favouring multiplayer experiences is not a new trend by any means: it is merely games returning to their roots as social play (Zimmerman and Salen, 2004).

Advancements in the processing power of computers and display technologies are continually pushing the development of highly realistic, media-rich, high-resolution video games. At the same time, developments in connectivity, server technologies and data transfer, together with data management techniques, are changing how games are played. The latter, especially, are pushing these video games back to becoming social gatherings and collective play. Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, known as MMORPGs, an increasingly popular genre alongside their predecessor, text-based Multi-User Dungeons/Domains (MUDs) and other Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), are a creative product of these developments.

The term 'massively multiplayer' is an exclamatory term for the number of players that can play the game at the same time, which is substantially more than what we have seen in online versions of single-player games; an increase from 32 people joined in a game in one dedicated server to 30000 people in the same environment. The area of interest for this thesis is the effects of this change in numbers and the change in the structure of the games to accommodate game experience for many players, on agency and player action within the game. Agency in games, as Murray (1998) described in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, is to be able to take meaningful action and see the `tangible results` of our decisions. Anthony Giddens, in his book *Constitution of Society* (1984), also associates power with agency as the agent's "capability of doing things".

The thesis is an attempt to understand and analyse the notion of agency in MMORPGs by taking Giddens' definition of agency within the framework of his structuration theory, as the basis, and to give evidence that the characteristics of MMORPGs and the social game experience require a perspective of analysis different to those explaining agency as interaction with the computer and as another aesthetic form depending on immersion (Murray, 1998).

One reason to take Giddens' approach is to show that decision making, realisation of action and monitoring of action are all part of game experience, and not separated from each other, and can therefore be explained using the model he created for action. The other reason would be the need for a definition within a social theory because of the increasing social interaction and consciousness within these games.

While applying the model, it will be explained and discussed that certain characteristics of MMOGs, in terms of structure, game experience and social relationships between many players from different cultures, are important in building player agency, and they show similarities with the social structure of modern daily life which Giddens studied in his structuration theory, where the model comes from.

It is important to set the boundaries of the thesis, when we talk about agency and action, to the limits of the action of players within the game, and analyse them in the context and duration of the game and meta-game. Meta-game refers to other player alliances, clans, communities or producer websites designed for supplying information about game functions and enabling players, or potential players, to interact, communicate and even re-enact some actions outside the game. For

example, Eve Online has a special forum where players can buy and sell the items they produced or found during the game. Another example would be clan pages, where clan members discuss strategies and give orders. The thesis is not concerned about the conscious decision or intentional action of playing games within players' day-to-day real life, nor about the psychological stimuli that result in playing games. In the coming chapters, the motivations of players would also be considered and limited to game goals, achievements and the self-interest of players contained to player characters. In this paper the terms agent, actor and player will be used interchangeably.

As an example of MMORPGs, the thesis will refer to the game Eve Online by CCP, which has over 2 million players subscribed to it. In some cases, and to support with further evidence, Anarchy Online and Second Life will also be mentioned in the following chapters.

Methodology

As the research was based on Giddens' model within his structuration theory, and the majority of ideas came from his book *Constitution of Society* (1984), much of the work is done on textual resources and the works of social action theorists like Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, Pierre

Bourdieu and Emile Durkheim, understand and support the concepts that are necessary to the application of the model.

Demographic and psychological data regarding MMORPG players are used where necessary, taken from the Daedalus Project formed by Nick Yee which has the most substantial player data source.

Observations are based on participation in Eve Online and Anarchy Online games with trial memberships which activate full versions of the games for a limited time. During game play, player actions and relations were experienced and observed. In-game chat channels were used to participate in communication within the game.

For understanding of the use of forums, player participation on game design and continuity of player relationships, observation were made by joining, and viewing game forums and product web pages.

About the Games in Question

Eve Online: one of the most popular games in the genre of MMOG. The environment is the vast universe, and many galaxies formed of planetary systems. Players can choose from 4 races in the game, and organisations consist of corporations, and in addition player alliances.

Although it can be defined as a role-playing game, the main difference is that characters do not gain experience points from their encounters and use of skills. Instead they learn skills from skill books in real time as relevant to attributes they had chosen while creating the character, their roles in the game or as they see fit for their purposes. Training happens in real time, and every skill has 5 steps, and as the level gets higher for a skill the time to train increases respectively. Characters' attributes help to reduce time, or players can buy enhancers to reduce learning times, which in return need other skills to be learned. There is also an open market system in the game using one currency, ISK. With skills and blueprints, players can produce items for their own use or for sale; there are also basic items available from NPC (non-player character) merchants. During the trial game, an avatar has been created and named as Tonyukuk, which will appear as necessary in the course of the argument.

Anarchy Online: this is a science fiction game based on three factions; the corporate Omni-Tek, rebel worker caste the Clans, and neutrals, fighting for planet Rubi-Ka mineral reserves. There is an experience point system in the game similar to traditional role-playing games, and choices of skills for which experience points can be used to add to the character. This makes Anarchy Online more a proper role-playing game,

where players gain experience by fighting or using skills and level up, unlike Eve Online. There are shops in which players can buy additional garments and weapons, and they can also sell their items, not just to NPCs but to other players.

Chapter I – Theoretical Background

This chapter is an overview of theories and concepts that are necessary and useful for understanding the further argument, and to strengthen the relevancy of discussion. The purpose is to explain the action and agency referring to the usage in interactive narratives or environments, and in social action theories.

In its concise and broadest definition, *agency* means action and active operation. The second meaning brings another aspect of action which is relevant to game action. *Operation* implies a mechanism, a system of parts, controlling the functions of a system. This highlights the link between agency and interactivity, since performing actions in digital contexts means reciprocal action with the system meaningfully, in other words appropriate to the context. Because of this linkage, agency became both the means and end of interaction. In *Rules of Play*, while defining interactivity, Salen and Zimmerman explain playing a game as “making choices within a game system designed to support actions and outcomes in meaningful ways”. (2004, p.58)

In one of the most influential books in this area, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997, p.126), Janet Murray defines agency as “ the satisfying power to

take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices". She explains agency as one of the aesthetics of interactive narratives, alongside immersion and transformation. Immersion, as Murray describes, is the "feeling of being submerged, sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality", Murray makes a connection between immersion and agency in a way that the expectancy of the player/agent of the level choices would be higher if there were higher immersion. This means that the more realistic the representation is, more actions should be available to the users.

Murray looks at agency from the narrative point of view, and categorises the player behaviour in terms of narrative forms and story types within digital environments. Apart from the constructivist form of agency, in which she describes the players' creative power in the MUDs, all other forms, like navigating, puzzle solving and contest, implies that the player is the sole person to act in a narrative. Murray does not mention the agency occurring in players' interaction between one another, nor the players' power to make a meaning of their actions out of the frame of a narrative. This idea of agency as fulfilling the part in the narration or the story context is not enough to explain the origins of action in social games like MUDs and MMORPGs. Brenda Laurel in her book *Computers as Theatre* (1992) talks about the three `variables` that she previously

identified for interactivity; “frequency (how often you could interact), range (how many choices are available) and significance (how much choices really affected matters)” (Laurel 1986, 1992) and later she adds the participation variable. She gives the example of the representation of the moon surface and the interactivity based on the ability to walk and look around. In that case, immersion is created by the close resemblance to reality and the participation by moving around. There is no necessity to discuss immersion further for the purpose of this paper, whether it is a result of the quality and scope of representation or the level of participation. But for agency, the two most important parameters are significance and participation, because agency is the power to act, and participation means the actions have an effect. In MMORPGs, participation happens not because of the quality of the representation but because of participating in the ongoing action and the ability to affect it. Salen and Zimmerman explain meaningful play in a game as the “relationship between actions and outcomes... [being] both discernable and integrated in to the larger context” (2004,p.34). That means that the outcome of an action is immediately communicated to the player, and also the game tells the player how actions will affect the overall game experience or the rest of the game. Power, on the other hand, comes not from knowing how it will affect the rest of the game but acting to affect the rest of the game.

Anthony Giddens in *The Constitution of Society*, explains agency by highlighting the power of the agent and states that:

Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently (1994, p.9).

Giddens makes a connection between agency and power by stating that:

To be able to 'act otherwise' means to be able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention... to be an agent is to deploy range of casual powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others (1994, p.14).

Giddens defines agency through the stratification model of the agent in action (Fig. 1) as motivation, realisation and reflexive monitoring are integral parts of the action, and unintended consequences of action feeds back to unacknowledged conditions. Agency includes not just intentional doings but also unintentional doings, as long as they are "more or less within [agent's] control" (1994, p.11).

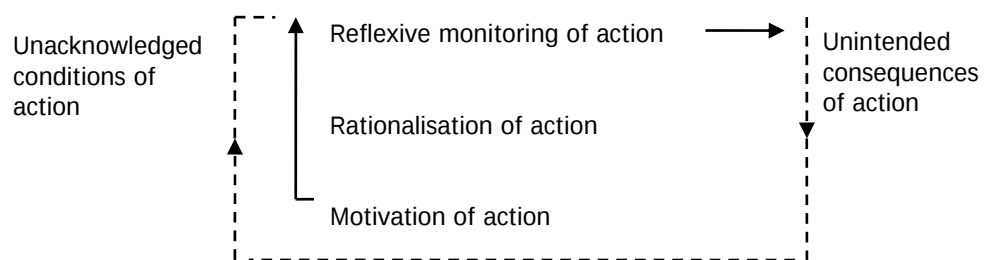


Figure 1 Model of the Agent. Source: Giddens (1994)

This model shows the reasoning of the agent and the purposive, conscious action. Rationalisation is where agents are aware of their intentions, described as “practical consciousness” by Giddens, which refers to “day-to-day consciousness”. Actors are not expected to have a discursive understanding of their actions where they can discursively speak of their motivations whether they are unconscious or not, but since they do reflexive monitoring and act knowledgeably, they can speak of their intentions. Giddens emphasises that actions have flow and continuity; they are not separate entities, as one action follows another in a *durée* of daily life. Actors reproduce the conditions that enable the structures which are in turn organising the actions of actors. This duality of structure, which is “both constraining and enabling” (Giddens, 1984) is the main concept of Giddens’ structuration theory, and through reflexive monitoring, actors find reasons to their actions and adjust “their activities [recursively] to create conditions that makes these activities possible”. (Giddens, 1984) As his theory was intended to understand modern societies and reproduction of social systems, it is important to mention the view of Pierre Bourdieu, which opposes the rationalisation of agents. Bourdieu’s theory of practice is more relevant for class-conscious and tribal societies where agents are preconditioned by the habitus, “the durably installed generative principle of regulated

improvisations” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.78), and the “objective intention... always outruns the conscious intention”. (Bourdieu, 1977, p.79) They continuously monitor their actions according to the objective structure, the collective history. Objective structures that hold the laws and experiences are called fields, which govern the habitus and practices of the members of the fields. Fields can be thought of like professions or social positions. Similar to Giddens’ structuration, Bourdieu’s theory displays a duality between the habitus and field. While field defines and directs the way the members participate in the field, it can only exist as long as agents reaffirm the objective meaning in their systematic dispositions.

Structures, as Giddens point out, can be defined as rules and resources, but rules are generally associated with games, and game rules are “formalised prescriptions”, whereas “rules implicated in the reproduction of social systems are not generally like this. [They have] far greater diversity of contestation than game rules” (1994, p.18). With this in mind we can stress that MMORPGs are more contestant because the game is continuous, with no save option, players spend much time and money on their characters and competition is in different levels, even on relationships, which is not unique to MMOGs, but the level and area of competition is higher. Also, most of the rules are not made explicit by

the program, so the rules do not make the game; obeying rules or not is the experience of the player.

Social Action

The literature on social action theories is in abundance, and it is neither possible nor appropriate to discuss it here from every method of social study apart from Giddens' structuration, which the model belongs to. Though, as the Giddens' model represents social agent and, the thesis attempts to demonstrate the agency in multiplayer games highlighting social action, it will be supportive to mention what social action means in general. As Talcott Parsons broke it down in his book *The Structure of Social Action* (1968, p.44), logical units of an 'act' includes:

- 1) an agent/actor
- 2) an 'end', "the future state of affairs toward which the process of action is oriented" (1968, p.44)
- 3) a starting 'situation' which is formed either by 'conditions' which are not in control of the actor's will , or 'means' that are in control of the actor's will, to be changed by his ends
- 4) the relationship between these elements and the actor's purpose to make means and ends.

With this logical partition of act in mind, Max Weber defines (1997) four types of social action according to the mode of orientation:

1) Rational orientation towards individual ends where the actor uses the “expectation of behaviours of others as conditions and means” (1997) for the achievement of his/her own ends. All MMOG game experiences can also be an individual experience and most players seek their individual goals through the actions of other players which change the conditions of their actions by supplying or limiting resources. For example, in Eve Online, a player can choose to play independently only by going through missions designated by the program but his/her success in the game will still depend on the other players, as they are either opposing force, suppliers of resources, or helpers.

2) Rational orientation towards an “absolute value”, a belief for its own sake without any expectation of success. As Weber includes some ethical and religious behaviour, in games, this can be found in terms of friendship, loyalty to an alliance and corporations, as in Eve Online, or loyalty to the political thought, as in Anarchy Online, belonging to rebel workers association against corporate forces.

3) “In terms of affectual orientation,” motivated by the emotions of the actor. As an example of this type of action, Nick Yee mentions that about 25% of the players play with a romantic partner and 19% play with a member of a family (2005b). There is also a tradition of online wedding, which is incorporated in games like Ultima Online and World of Warcraft, for people who wish their avatars or characters to be married. This can be totally virtual, and characters may not know each other in the real world, or even their true gender, but their actions will be oriented towards each other during the game.

4) Traditionally oriented as long practices became habits. Some game actions are common practices which have their origins from single-player games like exploration, talking to characters in the games. Most MMORPGs resemble one another in terms of structure, which makes it easier for players to continue practices as they have been established through years of game experience. But on the other hand, players tend to create different characters to experiment with different styles of playing, and increase their fun.

Weber also explains, when conceptualising social action, that not every contact between humans is social. His example is a crash scene, which is accidental, but every utterance, negotiation, insult after a crash can be

regarded as social action. In MMORPGs, many players perform in the same space, encountering one another without any social action unless they coordinate their actions with or towards one another or they start chatting, which normally shows itself spatially as people getting closer in the game space. Weber also accepts economic activity as social only “in so far as, the actor’s actual control over economic goods is respected by others.” (1997) In games, obviously, selling and buying are economic social actions, because people respect ownership and value. In Eve Online, people keep their goods or items in containers, and the ownership is forced by the game rules in the form of sanctions, i.e. reduced security points of players and the right to kill to the owner, on people who try to shoot or open the containers of others.

Chapter II – Model of the Player/Agent and Elements of Structuration in MMOGs

This section will demonstrate whether player actions constitute a unity between their motivations and reasoning and how, if the structure of the game enables players to act as social agents.

Motivation

Giddens' model includes motivation as an integral part of the action, but later he stresses that motivation is not related to the continuity of action as reflexive monitoring and rationalisation (1984, p.5). As the later examples of player motivations will emphasise, motivations "refer to the wants which prompt the action" (Giddens, 1984). They may be the reason for wanting to play the game or a potential for an action, but do not have to be revived each time during the flow of action. Some of the game motivations mentioned below can be translated into direct objectives and goals during the game. Goals can also initiate a range of actions.

...whilst the motives of the players are all very similar, the players nevertheless select very different characters.

Therefore, we presumed that the players, regardless of their motives, set themselves different goals inside the gameworld. These differences should eventually lead to different strategies

or patterns of action and of course to a predilection for certain characters. (Kolo and Baur, 2004)

Nick Yee's (2005) analysis of player motivations based on Bartle's player types (1996, cited Yee 2005), identifies 3 main factors and 10 sub-factors of player motivations, surveyed from over 32000 respondents.

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement Progress, Power, Accumulation, Status	Socializing Casual Chat, Helping Others, Making Friends	Discovery Exploration, Lore, Finding Hidden Things
Mechanics Numbers, Optimization, Templating, Analysis	Relationship Personal, Self-Disclosure, Find and Give Support	Role-Playing Story Line, Character History, Roles, Fantasy
Competition Challenging Others, Provocation, Domination	Teamwork Collaboration, Groups, Group Achievements	Customization Appearances, Accessories, Style, Color Schemes
		Escapism Relax, Escape from RL, Avoid RL Problems

Figure 2 Source: Nick Yee (2005a)

His analysis was to show that there are no specific player types, but factors of motivations that co-exist together and do not necessarily reduce the other factors for the same player. This table includes motivations, both general, for playing a video game in terms of necessities with sources outside, and those that can be translated directly to playing style in terms of goals. For example, escapism or necessity of a relationship, role playing and competition are also motivations for choosing to play a multiplayer video game in general, regardless of actions in the game. Escapism and relationships may have

subconscious and psychological initiations. It is not within the scope of this paper to look into subconscious motives, which still invoke many discussions, as the agency is in the doing and acting; what is important is the place of motivations in the process. Whether they are unconscious or subconscious motives, the actions consciously taken to satisfy these motives will be the same as if they were conscious motives. For example, whether a player had a troubled childhood where friends made continuous abuse of his/her capacity in sports or games at school and offended the person, and this created a subconscious urge to compete ferociously in the MMOG, the actions taken in the game to achieve this will be the same as a conscious motive to be good at competing with others. Games have their own rules and structures to actually initiate these motives. We can not think of a multiplayer game which does not motivate people to social relationships and competition. In the motive of competition and challenging others, whether it has subconscious sources, the player will still go through the same set of actions, although the intensity and duration may change. Therefore, in the practical consciousness of the agent to which Giddens refers (1984) as day-to-day consciousness, the agent will be aware of his/her own motives as challenging others, or to be better than others.

Yee does not agree with Bartle's view of motivations suppressing one another, and one player can have more than one motivation which he/she pursues at the same time. Although it is true that players can have more than one motivation in the game or to play the game, it is not clear how they order their actions, or if they act simultaneously.

The activities of players may look as if they are motivated by different needs and wants, but when the actions are taken as a duration and continuity, players tend to show an inclination towards a certain motivation. Most of the players talk about their motivations as their objectives, or what they do in the game most, what they enjoy doing in the game. But if they have general motives like escapism, or to be social in the game, their actions do not necessarily follow this, since playing the game in any way in any role will fulfil this need.

Rationalisation of action

Giddens (1984) talks about three levels of consciousness, and although he does not directly link them to Freud's id, ego and super ego, he states that he uses unconscious/cognitive, practical consciousness and discursive consciousness instead. Practical consciousness refers to day-to-day consciousness, Giddens explains as the foundations of routine

actions. And this is the level at which actors are expected to go through their rationale and talk about their intentions. “Meaningful and purposive action requires agents to be able to speak about their actions, their intentions and have a theoretical understanding of their action” (Giddens, 1984). Only more competent actors are capable of reasoning and talking about their intentions on a discursive level. As there are no clear boundaries between discursive and practical consciousness, players switch between the two constantly as they perform their day-to-day actions. They also continue to communicate in a discursive manner using chat channels.

It is also difficult to find the separation line between two levels of consciousness in games because of constant awareness of rules, functions, feedback, established practices and routine activities. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p.366) give an example of pressing a button in the game which has both integrated and discernible meanings. The button does something immediately; opens a secret door, for example, but also the meaning of this button stays in the player’s mind throughout the game as that particular button which opens a secret door. Since it enters into practical consciousness, the activity will be performed every time the player character comes across the button. It is possible to see the player sitting in front of the computer, capable of

acting outside the game as in meta-games, establishing social relationships and entering discursive analytical discussions as the discursive consciousness, the super ego; and the player character in the game, through which the player performs practical activities, is subject to the game environment's forces and constraints, as the practical consciousness, the ego. The players of MUDs, though, have a different positioning. In MUDs, the game is text-based, and the player sitting in front of the computer does all the communicative reasoning and uses programming skills at the same time. Players have various powers depending on their status, rank and experience. They can create, manipulate and constrain as they intend. This presumes higher consciousness, because it is not just playing the game but also creating the game with use of technical knowledge and correct phrases, and coded words to program the game. Players in most of the MMOGs enter external conversation with each other, their discourse on the game and on their actions goes beyond the game, using either general or group forums, and some players even meet outside as a social gathering, but also establish relationships which are later put into game experience.

It is important to mention the role of communication in the rationality process. Communicative action is a form of social action developed by Habermass; it accepts that there is a universal understanding and

knowledge that actors include in their reasoning through use of language and actions of communication. “Games are representations and they also represent” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The meaning is conveyed between players according to their knowledge of the representation and what it represents. Communication is an important part of establishing the meaning. Communicative action and discursive action are types of this form of social action. Communicative actions, explains Tony Manninen (2003) “aim to bring about a consensus through rational discussions under ideal speech conditions”. Through negotiations and discussions, players establish a common understanding and coordinate their actions. For example, in Eve Online, factions or alliances coordinate their attacks, organise their economic actions like trading and transporting, and define their strategies through linguistic communication. Their relationships are also structured through use of general, group and private chat channels. During general discussion or chat, players choose their partners or buddies, who later move into a more intimate channel.

Discursive action, on the other hand, “aims to establish a set of common norms for all participants. They entail the explanation, discussion and... criticism of the validity [of] norms that govern communicative action.” (Manninen, 2003)

Remembering Weber's definition of social action oriented towards an absolute value, communicative action is crucial to setting up that absolute value, the norms of collective absolutes. Players rationalise their actions that are oriented towards group ethics and racial roles through communication. Choosing a side and acting for the benefit of the side is an example of this concept. The discursive action also empowers the players to decide on game balance, and if necessary to act on limiting certain features. They criticise or approve game rules like designated areas for player killing, or prohibition from player killing. In some games there are limitations to players attacking other players if their experience points are too high compared to those of their opponents. For example, during game play in Eve Online, the character Tonyukuk was killed by another player, which started a private conversation where criticism of the action was made. As a result, the attacker paid compensation to Tonyukuk in a scenario where there are no established rules for this negotiation.

Unintended Consequences/Unacknowledged circumstances

Nearly all of the actions in MMOGs are intentional, as players have constant realisation of their intentions; they are discursive of their

actions and consequences, and there is direct feedback in almost every interaction. For unintended consequences, the player must act with lack of full knowledge of the game world or the game functions feel/look like they can do more than they actually can. Unintentional actions can also occur when players have different understandings of the meaning than that which the game conveys and which the other players transfer in their communications. A player may choose to become a part of an alliance or a corporation to achieve security and to share resources, but the same player can also increase risking his/her security and make lots of enemies unintentionally by becoming part of an alliance. Another example is that items in the games are balanced to bring both advantages and constraints if the player has not achieved the necessary experience level, and these constraints will stay as a new condition for further action, until resolved.

When groups of people routinely interact, the outcomes of their actions, intentional and unintentional, have consequences for other groups who may be physically present, who may come to the same location at a later time, or who may be at a different place at the same or different time. (Cohen, 1989; Rosenbaum, 1997)

This idea of Cohen cited by Rosenbaum is supported and strengthened by the characteristics of MMOGs which are not sessions of games but continuous experiences. Unlike single-player games, there is no save

option to turn back to a previous or desired position and conditions.

Players who can monitor the unintended consequences may not monitor the conditions those consequences set for another player. In addition to this, the unintended consequences of actions may become motivations or intentions of others once they are established and known.

Reflexive Monitoring of Action

Actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move. (Giddens, 1984 p.5)

In MMORPGs players have to monitor their skills, experience points, resources, capital, positions and social relationships, every time an action has an effect on one or more of these. Since these accumulate to resources for players to perform and achieve their goals in the game, their constant re-evaluation or regeneration is important, and this can be done by intentional activities and monitoring of the results.

Reflexive monitoring is important for defining agency, because actors acknowledge their capabilities and the impact of their actions also through monitoring. Furthermore, it presumes interactivity, the reflection between the player and the system, which is one of the constructors of

agency in virtual contexts. It is not groundless to say that interactivity and reflexive monitoring are coincidental. Although interaction, in this case action, is prior to monitoring, during the latter, acknowledging of interaction occurs. Salen and Zimmerman use Brian Sutton-Smith's model to explain general structure of game experience.

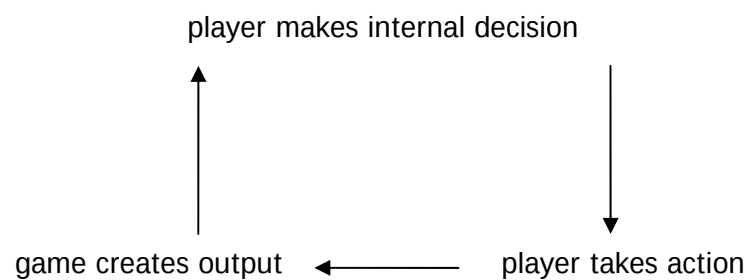


Figure 3 Source: Salen and Zimmerman (2004)

Players monitor their actions through various informants (audio-visual, textual, symbols) that are issued as outputs of their actions, and they adjust their actions to the conditions around them using the information. For example, their own health bar or shield bar, or those of their opponents, the identification of enemies and friendly characters, are important for players' rationale. As this is correct for even the conventional single-player games, players do not expect non-player characters to monitor their own actions. What is different in MMOGs is that, as in a multiplayer chess game, players are aware that the other

players are doing the monitoring, and they also make decision at the same time.

One apparent reason that monitoring in the games is done through necessary feedback systems and instructions during interactive activities is because they are not physical but representational. Brenda Laurel (1993) states that `interactivity is highly context-dependent` and interactive environments are `representational contexts`. She also states that actions are representational because of her approach from drama, and relates the sequence of actions to a plot. Players monitor their actions through the development of the story and towards a predetermined end. Conventional single-player games are increasingly narrative, and most follow a plot. However, Laurel admits that game action is not as strict as a play script, saying “a program can lead to actions that can vary widely from session to session” (Laurel, 1993 p.68). This depends on how strict the rules of a program are, and how many choices there are. The idea of session also means that the game is not continuous, or it can be played again and again from the same point in the plot until the player is satisfied with the score or the outcome. In multiplayer games there is a wider area of action because there is not only the program, but all other players contributing to the conditions and choices at that moment.

It is important to point out here that Giddens describes reflexive monitoring as a characteristic of modern societies and modern behaviour. It is his departure from the traditional, pre-modern societies where actors monitor their actions in the context of their appropriateness to traditions and to what is conventional. The departure from single-player narrative games to loose multiplayer scenarios echoes this modern usage of reflexive monitoring.

Elements of Structuration in MMORPGs

Tracing the elements of structuration in MMOGs would strengthen the relevance of the model of the agent. Since the aim of the paper is not to present the structuration theory within MMOGs, this will only serve to point out the characteristics of game systems that are effective on the agency explained by the model as one element of structuration.

Therefore this section will exhibit the continuity of the action and the duality of structure in games to highlight the power of the agent and the use of model.

Durée, Longevity of Action

Giddens (1984, p.35) talks about three “dimensions of temporality”, time spans that run parallel to each other in social structures; the duration of

daily activities, the life span of individuals and the long-term existence of institutions. The model explains the agent acting purposefully with practical consciousness in his/her daily activities which are cyclical and which in the long term reproduce the systems.

Giddens (1984, p.3) stresses that “purposive action is not composed of an aggregate or series of separate intentions, reasons and motives”. The day-to-day activity of agents “occurs as a *durée*, a continuous flow of conduct” (1984, p.3). Since the daily action is repetitive and recursive, it does not flow in one direction. Giddens call this “reversible time”. It is socially reproduced each time by agents. Looking at MMORPGs, most of the action is recursive either by being repeated by each player or by the same player every day. For example, in Eve Online, players either continuously extract minerals from asteroids and sell them or they fight with pirate NPCs and collect their jettison for rewards to make money.

Collecting experience points in MMORPGs or learning new skills are also daily activities which create conditions for further action. Giddens' stratification model of the agent, which is cyclical and continuous, finds an expression in MMORPGs within the continuous flow of action of players from the start and not only until they go offline but as long as they stay a member in the game.

In the real world, the life span of the individual is “irreversible” because of natural constraints, and it flows in one way, towards an end. In games, there is no biological life span of the player, and player characters are not subject to natural conditions. Traditional games in particular, which allow players to save and restart the game, are far from these real-life phenomena to include in the game experience, as games are not meant to be serious. MMOGs still obey the time dimensions that are associated with the social life and structure, because they are “perpetual worlds”. The action is continuous, and although players have no life span unless they change their characters or leave the game completely, the game exists independently, and as long as any number of players take part in it. This also makes the establishment of institutions, the guilds, corporations, alliances, production units and social and economic systems possible. Players continue their day-to-day activities and continuously monitor their actions while they set up long-lasting establishments.

Duality of Structure

The concept of duality of structure, which is primal to structuration theory, holds the belief that structures are not only constraining but also

enabling “in virtue of the inherent relationship between structure and agency” (Giddens, 1984). While explaining constraints, Giddens mentions (1984, p.25) Durkheim, who generally accepted constraints as independent to human will, and external, although most of Durkheim’s views on constraints “depends upon the observation of *longue durée* of institutions both pre-exists and outlasts the lives of individuals” (Giddens, 1984). In social structures, the establishment of institutions or practices by reproducing social systems in a long duration, creates constraining rules and resources. For Giddens the same constraining rules and resources are also enabling the actions, and those recursive actions in return reproduce the social systems. Talcott Parsons also mentions Durkheim’s view on the difference between the natural consequences of an act and sanctions.

A person’s will is constrained by the application of sanctions... a sanction is a consequence of an act the occurrence of which is dependent in some sense on human will, though not of the actor. (Parsons, p.379)

Brenda Laurel states that “constraints are necessary to contain action within the mimetic world” (1993, p.100). This view is important to create realistic representations in games which constrain the action to the time and technology of the narrative. MMOGs generally do not have this concern, since they are not tight narratives; also, rules are not to

contain players to a plot, but to a social play which would be more limiting if there were no constraints. In Eve Online, players can not kill other players in high-security areas. Although this sounds like a limitation to game play, it is enabling players to actually play the game, especially if they are new to the game. Players are limited in their actions without learning new skills or, as in Anarchy Online, they are limited with their experience points which can be distributed to skills. Once they attain new skills they are enabled to take more actions. Also in MMOGs there are actions which are happening as a result of social interaction which is not programmed, but enabled by the game structure. As an example, during the game play, the character that is used for study, Tonyukuk, encounters another player character while mining from an asteroid. They negotiate for the transportation of minerals extracted by Tonyukuk which does not fit in the cargo hold of his ship, and thus requires many rounds. The other player accepts to carry and sell the minerals and give the money to Tonyukuk for 10% of the profit. It can be said that their actions are role play of an economic contract rather than a representation of a real-life contract, a unique negotiation between two agents rationally acted and monitored respectively.

Clans, alliances and corporations can also be constraining because of their mode of conduct, rules and loyalties, but at the same time they have more effective communication between players to conduct the meaning and purpose of their actions. Players can play their game roles more efficiently when they become a part of a multi-role group. Apart from the roles that they choose for their characters in game “each player has a role... within this system of social relationships... from arch-enemy to team leader to partner-in-crime game.” (Salen and Zimmerman) One reason not to think about these roles as habitus in terms of subjective meaning or professions that controls the actions of actors as Bourdieu suggested, is that in games these roles are not fixed, and players constantly change sides and learn skills that do not necessarily belong to a specific role.

Mentioning duality of structure, it is important to consider the role of players constructing the structure of MMOGs through their day-to-day activities, which include reflexivity and rationalisation. While structure is enabling the players to act, it is their actions that reproduce the same conditions, hence structuration. For example, being involved in economic activities like production and trade, players contribute to the main structural elements of the game that runs with a market economy.

Jiyan Wei in his article *The Role of the Everyday User in the Evolution of MMORPGs* (2006), talks about the role of the user in the social construction of technology:

...relevant social groups will have different problems associated with a particular technological art[e]fact. Due to the interpretive flexibility of an art[e]fact, these social groups will be able to create varying solutions to these problems, and infuse the technology with different meanings. Ultimately, certain interpretations or solutions will become more widely accepted than others, and the shape of the art[e]fact will stabilize. (Bijker and Pinch 1987 cited Wei, 2006)

In an interview (Rossignol, 2005), Nathan Richardsson, the senior producer of Eve Online, mentions how the programmers and designers of Eve Online are all players of MMOGs and they constantly monitor what activities are being performed by players and how they contribute to game play. Programmers who are more competent actors in their level of discursiveness by taking part in the game action, they actively contribute to the developments from their experiences of the game. Richardsson stresses the power of the players in defining and creating the content in the game and their contributions in terms of feedback to develop the game:

The community is an incredible source for how to improve the game and what they do within the game gives us constant inspiration for what we should implement next. Being so open-

ended means the players do what they want and we try to keep up and add support and tools to take emerging behaviour further. (Rossignol, 2005)

What was traditionally given to the test game player in terms of contributing the game development with corrections and improvements, are given to the ordinary player as part of his/her game experience.

Conclusion

Giddens' definition of agency, and his model of the agent within his structuration theory, helps us to understand the dynamics of player action which has its real-life characteristics because of a) similar positioning of players within a social environment, b) acknowledging roles where they exercise power to manipulate one another's courses of action, and c) where they establish relationships which are institutionalised within the game and meta-game – external communities relating to the game, such as forums, channels and clan pages.

It is explained in theoretical background, with references to both interactive narrative theories and to social theories, that agency is the notion of the ability to act purposively and consciously, which establishes itself as meaningful action. Thus, by taking Giddens' model of the agent and applying to the players of MMORPGs, the paper traced the meaningful and purposeful in their actions, from the motivation to reflexive monitoring in relation to the game context in which they appear as both player characters and players. The existence of continuity of action in these perpetual worlds brought the attention to the power of players in shaping the game structure, thus creating a social agency

different to that regarded as `human agency` in interactive narrative environments.

The first chapter set the framework of thesis argument by making note of this difference, explaining views on agency and supporting the existence of social agency with evidence of social action types within Eve Online. However, picking up social action or communicative action examples would be inadequate to conclude that social agency would be a result of these actions without further defining action and its initiation.

In the second chapter, the elements of Giddens' (1984) model were applied to players of MMORPG, to show the ability of players to act as social agents. It is shown that players have various motives which affect their choices and preferences in the game, and argued that most of the motives consider social activity. Players have an understanding of their intentions, and they carry their discourse out of the game where they ground their reasoning in the light of the knowledge that is communicated to them from other players.

It is argued that reflexive monitoring proves to be the crucial element: it is the point where outcomes of actions are monitored as players interact and then make decisions for further action according to how much their

intentions are fulfilled. If reflexivity is part of the game action, then Giddens' (1984) model is useful and appropriate to examine the departure from conventional games and the social aspect of agency because of increased human interaction and social power.

In subsequent sections, the concept of continuity of action, time dimensions and the duality of structure are exhibited within the frame of MMOGs to position the players' daily actions in the duration of the games which are characterised as persistent worlds and to emphasise the player's role in shaping the game world akin to social agent in structuration, highlighting the model's pertinence.

On the way to drawing similarities between the digital/networked society and offline physical world society, the main criticism would be the disbelief in the significance of online actions and the impact of online relations to the real world.

We believed that actions could begin, unfold and conclude entirely online without any repercussions to things offline, and thus concluded that virtuality had its own set of ethics and values that did not correspond to the rest of reality. Based on this view of virtuality as an alternate, value-less reality, many authors have argued that the kinds of social realities that take

are formed online are not sustainable from a normative point of view. (Mejias ,2005)

As Mejias (2005) responded the arguments by giving examples of offline-oriented online actions and drawing differences and similarities to communities and network societies by placing social agency either in control of humans or program code, this paper suggested that although it is the code that establishes the structural constraints in which agents act, the code is a product of human agency too. MMORPG, and especially MUD, players have the ability to shape this structure, therefore retaining the agency which is socially created. However, it was not the aim of the paper to make a link between real and online game worlds - although there are examples of players continuing their relations in the real world and their game actions affecting their real-world economies, but to hypothesise that structures and actions generated virtually may work in principal to those of the real world and to define the agency in MMOGs through a model of agent drawn within a social theory to examine modern societies, which in turn makes it relevant in a medium that has already established some traditions. The arguments raised and discussed in this paper are significant to understand the constitution of online communities and, in the near future, a networked society where the actions of individuals (constrained

by the structures of a network) will re-create and enable the same structures at the speed of data within a non-fictional context, as they do in game scenarios today with MMOGs.

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