Running head: EFFECTS GAMES HAVE ON ONLINE AND OFFLINE COMMUNICATION

Why we play online games and how it effects our communication with others online and offline

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"Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational."

Huizinga, 1949. P 4



Abstract

This paper discusses the realm of online communication and how games such as massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG's) are effecting our communication with others. Works such as Homo Ludens by Johan Huizinga and the telling's of Herodotus are discussed with relevance to current and historical applications of the essence and importance of play. Drawing on relevance to discuss elements of the magic circle and a third space, Pokémon Go has been used as a recent example of how these concepts are prevalent in all types of games, as well as providing brief relation to World of Warcraft and The Sims in terms of synthetic worlds and breaking the magic circle.

Keywords: magic circle, synthetic worlds, third space, online games, MMORPG's, online communication, relationships, communities.



Games and play can create new circles of communication that exist outside of normal social circles, known as the third place. Online games and traditional games are influenced by a magic circle, that defines what rules are relevant in the real world, and in the game world. The proceeding text is an explanation of synthetic worlds, and how it is different from the "real world" explained within a current online context of MMORPG's and with reference to traditional games and play, directly providing examples from the recent Pokémon Go and also the 2,500 year old story of how the Lydians saved their civilisation with games.

Discussion of the concept of play and the introduction of the magic circle was first conversed by Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga in 1938, in his book Homo Ludens. Huizinga states that "we find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from "ordinary" life." (Huizinga, 1949, p 4). Over centuries play has been adapted to the technologies of the current time, for example there are statements recovered from the Greek historian Herodotus describing the famine in Lydia over 2,500 years ago. He states: "These games they invented as a resource against the famine, and thus they used to do:--on one of the days they would play games all the time in order that they might not feel the want of food, and on the next they ceased from their games and had food: and thus they went on for eighteen years." ("Herodotus on Lydia", 2012). This later led to the civilisation being divided in half, with half leaving Lydia in search of new lands, later becoming the Etruscans, later known for the Roman Empire, and therein saving their civilisation. As mankind make technological advancements, online games become a more prevalent pastime or career path and the essence of play and the magic circle evolves from the case described in Lydia to what we have now online. With current technology allowing communities to connect over online games from all over the world, developers are able to create games that impact the world and encourage people to be more active members of their community. Whether it be for their own benefit, such as Pokemon Go encouraging people to go out, walk around and explore. Or be it something on a larger scale such as RUFopoly, an interactive game designed to make people think about the challenges faced in the ruralurban fringe development ("RELU - RUFopoly | Birmingham City University", 2011).



There are those that argue that there is no magic circle, such as (Liebe, 2018). The Magic Circle is described as a scenario where the rules of the real world are suspended, and new normative rules are created in the game space. I believe that this is relevant in terms of online games such as World of Warcraft or The Sims, as there would be some rules that are relevant in the real world and in the game world, such as a character or person needs to eat to survive. But there are also those that would not apply, and other rules would take place, and in circumstances where the magic circle is broken, or the unspoken rules of the game is broken, the laws or rules of that world do not apply, and the person is no longer playing the game, they are playing their own modified version of the game where new rules apply. For example, when a player uses cheat codes in the Sims to change a Sims mood, age or needs, they are operating outside of the magic circle, as they are no longer playing the game the way that it was intended. With the example of The Sims, because it is not an online game played with other people, it is not so controversial that people break the magic circle, however in online synthetic worlds such as World of Warcraft, if someone was to use cheat codes to increase their character wealth or in game experience in this synthetic world, it can break the trust between players and become an unpleasant environment.

Edward Castronova is a Professor of Telecommunications and Game Design and works with the economics of synthetic worlds. He discusses online games such as MMORPG's in the context that "the synthetic worlds now emerging from the computer game industry, these playgrounds of the imagination, are becoming an important host of ordinary human affairs." (Castronova, 2007, p. 2). This is relevant in terms of games such as World of Warcraft or EVE Online where people spend most of their day or it is even their full-time job, to play the game and earn in game currency, which can in turn generate real world profits. One of the main aspects of these online games, is the social interaction that they facilitate between people that they never would have met had it not been for this "third space". It gives people the ability to communicate with people that they otherwise wouldn't know and gain an understanding of other perspectives that they would not have known about from closer niche communities or their direct offline communities. Online communication can also often



provide non-biased opinions as they do not directly know the person that they are talking to, close relationships can often hinder the response that the person may give because they are unsure of the response they will get especially if it is a personal topic or controversial topic that they fear they may be judged on. Whereas online if you are communicating with people that you don't personally know, you are less likely to hold back opinions because there is fewer consequences if the people you are talking to do not agree with your response, they will likely not have to interact with those people again if they choose nor will they be likely to see them in person, so there are fewer consequences. This can be a negative thing as it often promotes the "keyboard warriors" mentality of people saying whatever they want and having no fear of repercussions, although that is often the realm of social media, and gaming chats are generally more focussed on the task at hand. These synthetic spaces have allowed for the creation of a specific third space where people create new circles of communication, specific to that particular context, such as World of Warcraft, the communication or chats within that synthetic world are based around talking about the game, which enables the distinction of a third space. There have been reports by Frostling-Henningsson, 2009; Jansz & Martens, 2005; Jansz & Tanis, 2007 cited in (Trepte, Reinecke & Juechems, 2012) that "Gamers report that the social side of gaming is important to them and one of the strongest motivators to engage in gaming."

The Internet, and online games in particular can also facilitate communication about topics and interests that are not available elsewhere, particularly in small offline networks where people of similar interest may be difficult to find. The internet has enabled communication about topics and interests, that in small direct communities for example in small towns or isolated neighbourhoods, people may not have the opportunity to express their interest in these topics or issues with others of the same interest. Communities such as World of Warcraft facilitate communication between people all around the world, that they would not have had the opportunity to communicate with. This opens an avenue for people that struggle with social interactions face to face as well, as it allows them to talk to people of similar interest in a way that they are comfortable with and can express their opinions more confidently. It gives people the skills and understanding on how to communicate with people



that they are not familiar with online and therefore give them an insight into a community or subject that they would not have been knowledgeable in, given their close offline relationships. Relationships and communities developed via games can often be stronger than others because to play a game, you have to trust that the people you are playing with will follow the rules of the game and you are connecting over a similar interest in the game. Take an example of Pokémon Go. Although players need an internet connection to play the game, it is an augmented reality game which encourages players to go out into the world and explore and interact with other players, which can form new friendships and community circles.

To gain a clearer understanding of these topics, lets look at an example of Pokémon Go more deeply. The game became widely successful around the world being released July 6, 2016 by developer Niantic, and at June of 2017 there had been an estimated 752 million downloads of the application (Smith, 2018). However, popular the game may have been when it came out, users quickly left the game, with users peaking at 28.5 million and dropping to under 5 million in the US after 6 months (Siegal, 2017) due to lack of game content and buggy servers. Nearly two years later and the game has lost quite a lot of its player base, and those left would be classed as the "hardcore" or "dedicated" players. A lot of these players would have established groups of players that they frequently play with and enjoy spending the time playing the game with. This is evidence of a third space, whereby there may be some overlap with work and social circles and the Pokémon Go community, but it is also a separate circle of people, that the player has met while playing the game. The synthetic world being the augmented overlay that the game has created of the world.

Although it utilises real world landmarks, the game itself is played within a virtual overlay of the real world. Megan Farokhmanesh recounts the events of the 2017 Pokémon Go Fest in Chicago, which was widely regarded as a failure for the players and Niantic. 20,000 tickets were sold for the event with some participants flying in from other states and countries to participate in the first official event hosted by Niantic (Farokhmanesh, 2017). Although it was widely unsuccessful as reported by the players having network issues and generally not being able to play the game, the event created a



magic circle. The designated area within Chicago was that magic circle where new game rules applied to those that attended the event, which were different to those outside of the event space, and did not purchase a ticket, those players experienced the game as it normally is, beside from the mobile network issues experienced in the area, due to the sheer number of players attempting to connect to the servers.

As games have evolved over the centuries, they have been saving civilisation in more ways than one. They saved the Lydians by allowing them to pass time through a famine, and an increasing amount of games such as RUFopoly have been created to help change the world, and help people gain an understanding of how they can help the world through playing games. Communities have also thrived through the creation of online multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft, which has brought together millions of players since its release, all working together striving for the same goal; winning. There has been an increasing amount of discussion over whether online games have been helping or hindering human social development, while there are studies showing that games hinder social capital, it becomes dependent on the context in which the research is done, and what games are being analysed. Games such as Pokémon Go have allowed people that don't go outside and interact with people and live unhealthy lives, to go out and explore and meet new people and interact with people all playing the same game, even if those people have nothing in common except that they play the same game. This has been highly beneficial in allowing people to become more open minded and social with people that they would not have known otherwise and increases peoples motivation to go out and socialise more, with the help of a video game.



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