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Potentiality and Actuality: Some Results of an Ongoing Research on a Community of Massively Multiplayer Online Gamers

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Abstract. In my paper, I differentiate between two scientific approaches towards the Internet, one that examines the potentiality and one that studies the actuality of it. By briefly summarizing some of the results of my research of a community of video game players, I try to point out the flaws of the former method.

Keywords: mmorpg, netnography, Internet studies

In the last few decades, the Internet has become something ordinary, instead of being something special; as one Hungarian scholar puts it, it is no longer the playground of a small caste, but it is our main communication tool (Gelléri, 2001: 273.). "We are moving from a world of Internet wizards to a world of ordinary people routinely using the Internet as an embedded part of their lives." (Haythornthwaite–Wellman: 6) This embeddedness means that for many people using the Internet becomes a way of spending one's spare time. Playing online games is one possible and quite popular way to find amusement via the Internet. The popularity of such activities is empirically shown by a sociological survey which was carried out in 2008 (Csepeli–Prazsák, 2010). According to the research, the majority of Hungarian Internet users, 58 percent, played at least one online game (Csepeli–Prazsák, 2010: 107).

Despite the fact that the majority of users tried playing games, there are some considerable misunderstandings about the gamer culture, about people who play games regularly. Popular representations of gamers often depict them as socially isolated, highly alienated individuals. "According to popular belief, these games have caused players to forsake »real-life« obligations and »significant« offline relationships in order to pursue the »fake« and »trivial« online." (Chee et al., 2006: 154.) The discourse applies a simple dichotomy, where the offline is seen as the positive, real, valuable, traditional, while the online as the negative, illusionary, corrupted and outrageous.

These representations are important as they affect the scientific discourse itself. As Karvalics (2010) pointed out, these stereotypes influence scholars in a way that sometimes they let their parental or civic concerns overwrite their obligations to the scientific community and, to a certain extent, they neglect to meet the expected standards of scientific research. As he also points out (2010: 146.) that this can be understood as a symptom of moral panic which follows the appearance of many technological inventions. "Technological developments, like social and economic changes, can be viewed positively, as increasing opportunities, or negatively, as a source of increased risk. The risk element is a source of anxiety because the new technology appears to escape previous forms of regulation and its possible effects are relatively unknown, especially the effects on the vulnerable (e.g. children) or the 'marginal' groups (e.g. the 'underclass')". (Kenneth, 1998: 102)

As a result, academics often do not differentiate between the actual and the potential socio-cultural effects of Internet use. However, as actuality and potentiality are two different levels of being, one cannot present the latter as equal to the former. When authors look at the Internet as something harmful or as quite the opposite, something liberating, they often fail to distinguish between the two above-mentioned ontological levels and present their fears or hopes as actuality, not potentiality. Looking at some examples, we might understand how the lack of differentiation leads to false assumptions.

As Jahn-Sudman and Stockmann point out (2008: XVI), scholars often depicted the Internet as a world that lacks social sanctions, a world that lacks moral boundaries. If we treat this statement as something that describes a potential characteristic of Internet use, we could agree with it when we see how the technology allows individuals to act anonymously, avoiding risks, social sanctions, as it was pointed by Hubert L. Dreyfus (2009). Still, even if we have described **one** potential use of a communicational tool by this, it does not mean that we have described **all** the potential uses of that tool and, moreover, we have not said much about the actual uses of it, which might show many different forms in different cultural and social settings.

To prove my point, I would like to present some results of my ongoing research, in which I study a community of online gamers. Since the aim of my study is to grasp the everyday life of the community, I basically try to apply the methods of nethnography as presented by Robert V. Kozinets (2010). I use the method of participant observation during the offline meetings and also in the online social networks, and I also carry out structured and semi-structured interviews. I did try playing the game so I can understand its system better, but, as in his review Richard Bartle (2010) points it out, it is not necessary to regularly play a game to be able to research it.

In 2010, the group was only present on the online scene where they formed a so-called guild in World of Warcraft, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-

Playing Game (MMORPG), but, as time passed and bonds between the members became tighter, they started to organize guild-meetings, offline parties that today seem just as important in the life of the guild as the online events. As Jan van Dijk (2006: 168) also states, the two scenes are closely connected and hardly understandable without each other.

Rules with moral implications and social sanction formulate their community to a great extent. For example, the community expects their members to regularly play the game. Also, twice a week, they have prefixed times when they expect most members to log in. Becoming inactive in the game or missing the regular meeting times is something that the community tolerates if the individual has an explanation or excuse for his or her behaviour, but it is still something that has consequences. The guild master (GM) often demotes the players' avatar or they would not invite a specific gamer to raids. Raid is a very important feature of the game, in which the players co-operate and defeat monsters that individually none of them are capable of overcoming. The enemies which can be defeated during raids drop such items (loots) that are quite rare and on which the further progress of the avatars mostly rely. If they cannot progress, they cannot keep up with the others in strength, which means they become a less valuable member of the community, they lose their social status. Therefore, banning someone from raids is quite a setback for some players.

Also, as membership becomes a source of identity, behaviour becomes regulated in a moral sense too. The guild I research has a close relationship with another guild. They often visit each others' offline meetings; some of the members even have avatars in both guilds.[1] In the other guild it happened that someone was "kicked out" of the guild because he created an alternative character with a racist name. Despite the fact that he removed it as he met the disapproval of some leaders of the group, he still had to leave the group. As someone commented it, somebody with such an attitude would dishonour the name of the guild. In the guild of my research, reliability is quite important and it seems that whenever they talked of people who had to leave the guild, they often emphasized elements in their behaviour which can generally be considered as quite immoral like lying, gossiping or consuming drugs. On the other hand, the form of trolling, in which players spam the chat log with rude words, is an act that members could do because the previous GM also found it funny and did not forbid it. In the previous section, I only briefly listed and simplified some stories to a great extent, stories that are quite important in the life of the guild even to this day. By presenting some results

1 In the bipolar world of the game, to summarize it very briefly, there are two opposing factions, the Horde and the Alliance. The two factions consist of many fictional races of the fantasy world of the game. The taken side and the chosen race could also serve as a source of identity for the player, but I have no space to explain how this works in details. The guild I research is on the side of the Alliance, while the closely related one is on the side of the Horde.

of my research, I aimed to prove two points. The first point is that online gamers are not isolated individuals but quite the opposite: players are strongly connected to each other both offline and online. The second is that while the Internet can potentially be unregulated and amoral, this is certainly not the case with the community I research – their world is not one without social sanctions. From these two points, there come two theoretical conclusions, one in the narrower context of game studies and one in the broader context of Internet studies.

According to my findings, not the game but rather the interpersonal connections shape life online; it is the main motivation for most gamers for playing the game. They carry out tasks not necessarily because they enjoy doing it, but because others accept them to do it or because their status mostly relies on their achievements in the game. The strict rule to play the game in a regular manner, the often monotonous gameplay, the way how seriously success and failure in the game is taken by the members show that the game sometimes rather functions as work, as it was also showed in the case of a different game by T. L. Taylor (2006). The social consequences of not being online or not progressing fast enough to keep up with the other members sometimes turn gaming into a desperate act, thinning the line between play and work. For that reason, in the case of my community, we cannot apply without serious restrictions Huizinga's (1938) famous model of gaming, and for that very reason we cannot look at online gaming as something festive, liminal, and anti-structured.

From my results, I also conclude that examining the potential characteristics of the medium not only has its limits, but it can also be quite pointless and misleading. Potentiality-based texts mostly focus on the relationship between man and technological instruments and some of them even treat online networks as technological inventions, not as a possible space for social interaction (Crawford–Putter, 2007: 272–273). Such texts have an implicit technological determinist approach. When they try to examine the effects of inventions upon culture and society, they mostly consider the possible effects of the new technological inventions upon man and they neglect to consider the social, man-to-man relationships. For this reason, they are not really able to tell much about the role of the Internet in our lives although it becomes more and more part of our everyday existence. During my research, I found that it is our culture and social relations that shape how one uses the given tool as "reality is not constituted by the networks CMC [computer-mediated communication] users use, it is constituted in the networks" (Jones, 1995: 12).

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