

Position paper for “the Philosophy of Computer Games”

2009

Magnus Johansson

Department of Computer and Systems Sciences
Stockholm University

magnus@dsv.su.se

ABSTRACT

MMOG:s are virtual worlds with millions of players interact everyday. The last couple of years these worlds have been the focus of many researchers and these worlds has been described by people with various backgrounds. This far most of the work done in the field has been descriptive and exploratory. The contribution of this paper is to start to focus on interaction at depth. We introduce a norm typology to understand the fine details about how norms are being created communicated and abandoned in groups. Our assumption is that if we understand norms, we have a fairly good chance at understanding interaction in MMOG:s.

Author Keywords

MMorpg, MMOG, Norms, World of Warcraft

INTRODUCTION

MMOG:s are virtual worlds with a high complexity, where millions of people interact on an everyday basis. Some authors even claim that it would be possible to migrate to a virtual world with less interaction in the real world [Castronova, 2005]. Other researchers describe what could perhaps be considered as a partial migration [Meadows, 2008] to a MMOG. Irrespective if we believe that people eventually will abandon the real world in favor of virtual worlds or not, perhaps we should find a way to

understand MMOGs from a new perspective. Our perspective offers yet another view, with a focus on how norms are being created and communicated within groups (guilds) in MMOG:s.

RESEARCH TERRITORY

Our research interest is focused towards an understanding of how norms are being created and communicated in virtual worlds, with a focus on guilds in World of Warcraft. This far we have created a rough model, based on Gibbs norm typology [Gibbs, 1965], where different types of breaches against norms can be classified depending on the severity of the breach and if there will be a sanctioned or not. Our contribution to the model is that we have complemented some of the lower levels, making it usable to describe some of the norm breaches that are somewhat common in MMOGs, such as “grief play” that have been described by Smith [Smith, 2004].

There is a close relation between Normative Multi Agent Systems and Virtual Worlds, and we aim to explore the possibilities to create a norm system that could describe Human-Human interaction, Human- Agent interaction and Agent-Agent interaction. We have chosen to describe all characters (both human and computer-generated)

as agents in our model, and the reason is that we need to choose different levels of detail to understand different kind of norms.

If the norm typology we are working on, can highlight the interaction and create an understanding for how norms are created, communicated in these worlds, we argue that we have a model that can serve as a tool when creating game content in the future and also create an interesting contribution to the field of Normative multi agent systems research..

IMPORTANCE

There has been research about conflicts and norms in MMOGs before, such as the work by Taylor [Taylor, 2006] and Smith [Smith, 2004], but most research this far has been exploratory, trying to explain what happens in games. What we need now, is to start to look at the details of group behavior, how and why conflicts appear. We argue that the benefit of our model is that we actually can see differences between different kind of norm breaches. We are developing a tool to measure the fine-grained details of conflict, communication and interaction in groups in virtual worlds.

When we study virtual worlds, we study interaction between humans, but we also study how a virtual environment affects the inhabitants of that particular world. We look at how Non player characters help create interaction, content and also makes the world interesting and dynamic. We also study how players overcome the computer-generated entities called MOBs (mobile objects) in games. Mobs are usually monsters that players will benefit from killing, earning experience points or treasures.

If we can improve the way these characters behave, we can create games where the interaction is so much deeper, and the whole experience will be taken to another level.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the social formation of a guild?

How are norms being created/ communicated within a guild?

Are there differences in norms between different kind of guilds?

METHOD

This far, much of the research that we have done is focused on methods taken from ethnography and actually one of the most important questions this far is how to develop a new method that is suitable for collecting data in an virtual world. We have ideas about tapping in to the chat channel and using software to capture in game videos, but some of the methods used in the past will certainly be used again, such as participant observation in the forum pages of guilds.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to understand certain aspects of norm creation in different groups. Our understanding of how norms are created, communicated and what happens when norms are being abandoned.

PRESENT RESEARCH

Until recently we have focused on the norm typology mentioned above, and how it would apply to some of the classic types of breaches

against norms mentioned by Smith [Smith, 2004]. The result is that Digra 2009 has accepted an article about the norm typology [Verhagen, 2009]. This is a first step, but we aim to further develop the typology. We are also planning on studies where we can collect data to see if this model will prove beneficial for studying norms in MMOGs.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Jack M. Balkin mentions “three kinds of virtual freedom” in the article “Law and Liberty in Virtual Worlds” [Balkin, 2006]. The first freedom is the freedom of play, which describes the freedom of the player. The second is the freedom of design, which describes the creative freedom the game designer has. The third freedom is the freedom to design together, this is where the designers and players actually develop the ideas that will go into the design in cooperation. The reason why the three kinds of virtual liberty are mentioned here is that to a large degree virtual worlds consist of many groups where norms appear at different levels. The first step in this

research is to understand groups in the game and how the world actually helps generate norms and game content. The second step is to understand the designers’ point of view and look at the other side of how these worlds spring to life.

REFERENCES

1. Balkin, Jack, M. Noveck, Beth, Simone.: “The State of play- Law, games, and virtual worlds”. New York University press. (2006) 86-87
2. Castronova, Edward.: Synthetic worlds, the business and culture of online games, The University of Chicago press (2005)
3. Gibbs, J.P.: Norms: The Problem of Definition and Classification. The American Journal of Sociology 70 (1965) 586 – 594
4. Heide Smith, Jonas.: Playing dirty- understanding conflicts in multiplayer games, The association of internet researchers, (2004)
5. Meadows, Mark, Stephen.: “I, Avatar”. New Rider. (2008)
6. Taylor, T.L.: “Play between worlds”. The MIT press. (2006)
7. Verhagen, Harko. Johansson, Magnus.” Demystifying guilds: MMORPG-playing and norms” Digra (2009). Accepted but not yet published