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Designing interactive systems through a game lens: An ethnographic approach

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ABSTRACT

This research has the aim to find new meaningful elements, in the video game world, that could inspire the design of novel gamified systems. Starting from the players' point of view, I looked at the field of the Massively Multi Player Online Role-Playing Games as a source of inspiration, conducting an ethnographic study in World of Warcraft. Thus, drawing on the findings gathered in my empirical work, I identified 9 recommendations to suggest new directions for the gamification design of interactive systems. Some of these recommendations are devised to suit the applications that pivot on user social participation. Others are aimed at imagining new forms of online communities. Others address those interactive systems that aim at changing user behaviors. These recommendations, by suggesting to support the development of intrinsic motivations, proposing new and diversified game elements and recommending to look at systemic design strategies, aim at addressing the limits of the current gamification techniques. At the high grade of abstraction they are left, they are meant to be applied to different fields.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

One trend that is marking contemporary society is the growing importance that recreational activities are taking into our life. Games are gradually breaking their traditional boundaries, spreading in a variety of areas connected to everyday communication and social interaction (McGonigal, 2011). Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (1962) stated that one of the main peculiarities of games is to place the player in a separate world, which confines the game activities in well defined space–time borders. Now, the distance between the play world and the ordinary world is progressively decreasing. Some phenomena with an increasing impact are symptomatic: *serious games* merge serious and fun goals, offering a teaching tool, by joining games with education techniques (Michael & Chen, 2006); *casual games* reach segments of the population previously reluctant to play video games: they also pervade every aspects of the daily life, by being designed to be played at every time of the day and in every context (Juul, 2010); *pervasive games* embrace their contexts and environments, merging with the real world in which they take place (Montola, Stenros, & Waern, 2009). All these phenomena

made game elements overflow into fields traditionally linked to the everyday life.

This trend is also more and more visible in interactive systems: an increasing number of non-recreational applications and services leverage game elements to offer users a more involving experience. Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, and Nacke (2011) called this phenomenon *gamification*, defining it as “the use of game design elements in non-game context” (Deterding et al., 2011: 10). Because of its wider use in HCI literature, I would suggest to follow the Deterding et al.'s definition of gamification, applying it in this work, keeping in mind that other authors (e.g. Huotari & Hamari, 2012) went in different directions.

Although gamification seems to have some kind of efficacy in users' motivations, engagement and behaviors (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014), several HCI researchers have highlighted its limits and open issues, posing the question of how to reconfigure the current most popular gamification strategies (Jacobs, 2013; Laschke & Hassenzahl, 2011; Nicholson, 2012; Rao, 2013; Sakamoto, Nakajima, & Alexandrova, 2012).

This research, by taking the players' point of view instead of that of the game designers, has the aim to find new elements, in the video game world, that could contribute to motivate users in online environments, engage them in the use of interactive systems and drive their behaviors toward healthier and more sustainable lifestyles. Looking at the field of the Massively Multi Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) as a source of inspiration,

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an ethnographic study in World of Warcraft has been conducted. Findings of this research grounded the development of a set of recommendations for design that try to suggest new ways for going beyond the current gamification techniques.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I provide a brief literature overview of gamification issues and proposals to overcome them. Second, I look at World of Warcraft to find new game elements to be applied in designing interactive systems. Then, I describe my ethnographic study and the related findings. I conclude the paper proposing recommendations that suggest new directions for gamification design.

2. Background

2.1. Gamification

Gamification is commonly used in designing interactive systems to enhance user engagement (Barata, Gama, Jorge, & Gonçalves, 2013), foster her motivations to participate (Cechanowicz et al., 2013) and change her behaviors toward a more sustainable or wealthy lifestyle (Ferron & Massa, 2013). Existing systems have received several criticisms (Deterding, 2013) on the accounts that, for example, (i) they add solitary, stand-alone game mechanics into existing environments to merely dress the surface of interfaces and services (Jacobs, 2013); (ii) they leverage exclusively extrinsic rewards, reminiscing of operant conditioning through Token Economies, ignoring users' intrinsic motivations and meanings (Laschke & Hassenzahl, 2011); (iii) they limit the game design elements employed to the so-called PBL triad (Points, Badges and Leaderboards), currently used in the majority of commercial applications (Werbach & Hunter, 2012) and academic research (Hamari et al., 2014). For these reasons Margaret Robertson called this *pointification*, stating that “what we're currently terming gamification is in fact the process of taking the thing that is least essential to games and representing it as the core of the experience” (Robertson, 2010), while Ian Bogost suggested to refer to it as *exploitationware*, since “it confuses the magical magnetism of games for simplistic compulsion meted out toward extrinsic incentives” (Bogost, 2011).

The issues pointed out by these authors suggest that we are not yet completely exploiting the means that games can provide to Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) and interactive system design. Recently, HCI community has started to wonder whether we should go beyond the current gamification practices, looking at video games not to induce automatisms, based on extrinsic awards, but to provide users with deep and rich experiences. Nicholson (2012) stresses the need of using meaningful game elements to develop a meaningful gamification, taking inspiration, for example, from Alternate Reality Games. Rao (2013) highlights that it is essential to rethink current gamification techniques based on competition, leaderboards and points, suggesting alternatives, as altruism and cooperative interactions. Sakamoto et al. (2012) suggest to go beyond common game mechanics, introducing a design based on values to develop services for behavior change.

Building on top of these considerations, I propose to look at MMORPGs to find new game elements capable of inspiring new ways of design for gamification.

2.2. MMORPGs and World of Warcraft

In recent years, MMORPGs have grown incredibly in complexity and size, engaging millions of players from all the world. The persistent nature of these worlds enhances the sense of projection in another reality, where players can realize their desires. Since they “are BOTH games and communities” (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, &

Moore, 2006: 413), they engender social dynamics that allow people to experiment new identities and find new relationships. Due the richness of the opportunities they provide, they require a huge amount of time to be played at best.

MMORPGs can be seen as an interesting phenomenon for gamification purposes on the basis of three factors.

The first factor is represented by the type of involvement that these games are able to elicit in their players. MMORPGs deeply engage their players satisfying all their fundamental needs (Rigby & Ryan, 2011). Yee (2006) has shown that players spend more than half working week in these environments, while Ng and Wiemer-Hastings (2005) found that MMORPGs are played for much longer periods of time than other games. For this, MMORPGs have been also reported to be the leading culprit in cases of video game addiction (Council on Science, 2007; Lee et al., 2007). These peculiarities make MMORPGs an ideal field of study for researchers that are looking for games able to inspire the design of highly engaging systems.

The second factor relies in their complexity. Players in MMORPGs can create and explore different identities (Taylor, 2006) and be engaged in a variety of tasks that go beyond the traditional notions of play (Calleja, 2007): activities like farming items or organizing people and resources, typical of MMORPGs, are closer to the world of work than to the world of game. This complexity, which merge “serious” and “fun” activities, can be interesting to observe, as a source of inspiration for finding new ways in which game elements can inform and support non-leisure activities.

The last factor is ascribable to their social component. One of the reasons that attract players to MMORPGs is the presence of other people (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). Compared to other kinds of multiplayer games, MMORPGs support a wider range of types of social interactions (Drennan, 2007). This richness of social relationships engendered by a game structure can lead to find new forms of social game elements for gamification purposes, going beyond the elementary social components employed in the current gamified systems (e.g. the social comparison of badges, or the competition through leaderboards).

World of Warcraft (WoW), introduced in 2004, with over 8 million of active subscribers in 2013 (Wikipedia, 2013) is still the most popular MMORPG available on the market. Players advance through 90 levels of play, exploring the vast world of Azeroth, collecting items, accomplishing quests and slaying monsters. Game tasks are mostly in the form of quests that non-player characters propose to players: accomplishing their requests, players can gain rewards such special items and experience points. Each player creates a character choosing its “race”¹ (e.g. Night elf, Human, Orc) and class (e.g. Mage, Priest, Warrior) that will determine its skills and its style of play. By and large, players are divided in dps (i.e. damage per second) with an offensive role, tank, with a defensive role, and healer, with the aim to heal other players.

Classes' asymmetrical abilities foster cooperation among players, who meet in temporary groups and structured guilds in order to complete the most difficult missions of the game (i.e. instances and raids). Instances are five players dungeons that can be faced either with a group of friends or using the dungeon finder, a feature that builds up casual temporary groups of players that do not know each other (pick-up groups). Raids are ten or twenty-five players dungeons that represent the hardest challenges in the game and can be accomplished using the raid finder, a feature similar to the dungeon finder but tailored to form larger groups, or by being part of a group of well known players, usually organized in a guild. However, the most challenging raids, which

¹ “Race” is part of the gaming jargon and it refers to the different physical appearances and abilities of different types of characters.

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