



Strategic thinking in virtual worlds: Studying World of Warcraft



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports our research on strategic thinking in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Specifically, we studied the World of Warcraft. Our overall goals were to expand our understanding of MMORPGs and their potential contributions to organizations, especially to the area of strategic information systems. We adopted an ethnographic approach to study how players develop strategic thinking. The results of the study are presented in two ways: a mechanism that has as its main focus in strategic thinking; and six hermeneutic themes. The hermeneutic themes include: (1) gradual immersion, (2) strategies as consequences of actions, (3) internalization of beliefs and strategies, (4) partial interpretation, (5) strategic thinking after the fact and (6) social aspects of strategy. We found that often players act with a partial interpretation of a problem; which is a preliminary and incomplete understanding of the task at hand. Depending on the degree of partial interpretations, players either follow other players or are able to articulate a sequence of actions called telescoping. Our findings provide insights regarding the social nature of strategic thinking in MMORPGs and the implications this may have for organizations, especially strategic information systems planning and thinking.

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1. Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) have turned into a relevant online phenomenon. For example, World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the most popular MMORPGs and subject of our study, reports over 8 million subscribers (Tassi, 2013). A MMORPG is a genre of games that could be characterized by three main features: massive number of players, some degree of role playing and a persistent fantasy world that continues to exist and changes even when players are offline. Game play in MMORPGs centers on characters' (avatars) progression. An avatar or a character is the computer graphic representation of a player in the game. The progression of a character is mainly achieved by carrying out various game challenges such as quests and dungeons; the completion of these requires careful formulation and execution of strategies.

Given their popularity and the fact that MMORPGs are fundamentally social games in which strategy, coordination and communication among players is crucial, it is not a surprise that this genre of games have attracted the attention of organizational researchers (e.g., Bainbridge, 2007; IBM, 2006; Messinger et al., 2009; Mueller,

Hutter, Fueller, & Matzler, 2011; Reeves, Malone, & O'Driscoll, 2008). They have pointed out that salient aspects of MMORPGs, such as sense making and the formulation of effective strategies, can indicate, and even predict, successful performance in organizations (Messinger et al., 2009; Reeves et al., 2008). Some have even argued that online games and especially MMORPGs "offer a glimpse into how leaders develop and operate in environments that are highly distributed, global, hyper-competitive, and virtual" (IBM & Seriosity, 2006, p. 3).

Moreover, Reeves et al. (2008) claim that the skills gifted players develop in MMORPGs could be transferred into corporate settings. In accord with this belief, IBM has introduced Innov8, a 3-D video game, for teaching business and IT skills to university students and young professionals. In a survey of two hundred gamers from IBM's internal gaming community, almost half of the respondents believed that game playing improved their business capabilities. Four out of ten said that they had already applied some of their skills from MMORPG environments to improve their strategic thinking at their real world jobs. Some of these skills include drawing information from multiple real time sources, making decisions in short periods of time, being able to manage multiple channels of communication at the same time, as well as motivating and rewarding group members.

Furthermore, as the future workforce of organizations comprise more and more from "digital natives" who play this type of games

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(Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), investigating the potential of these environments as platforms for developing business skills would seem warranted (Messinger et al., 2009; Reeves et al., 2008). This point is highlighted in an article by Brown and Thomas (2006) from Xerox in which the authors foresee the possibility of seeing lines in resumes such as “level 60 Tauren Shaman in World of Warcraft”² (see also Schrage, 2014). Such a line in a resume would suggest strategic, communication and coordination skills that arguably are necessary to obtain maximum progression of a character in the game. However, whether or not being a top level shaman in the game can suggest that an individual will perform well in organizations cannot be answered without empiric research on such gaming environments which is one of the purposes of this paper.

Among the alleged business skills that playing an MMORPG may develop in users, we decided to focus on strategic thinking and specially to investigate how this is related to strategic information systems planning and thinking. This is mainly because strategic thinking, as it will be shown below, was one of the most predominant recurring themes in our ethnographic data. Moreover, strategic thinking has long been deemed to be one of the most critical yet extremely challenging competencies to achieve for managers in organizations (Bonn, 2001; Heracleous, 1998; Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994) and fundamental for strengthening IT capabilities in organizations (Khani, Nor, & Bahrami, 2011). Hence, organizations have considered the training of employees in developing strategic decision making capabilities to be critically important (Earl, 1993; Moore, 1967; Zabriskie & Huellmantel, 1991). Yet, before establishing what strategic thinking skills an MMORPG player can develop, we need to know the nature of strategic thinking in such games. Thus, in this paper we aim at answering the following research question: What are the mechanisms that constitute the process of strategic thinking in MMORPGs and what are their implications for strategic information systems planning and thinking? Answering such a question can help to conjecture on the nature and extent of organizational skills – strategic thinking in particular – that an individual may develop by playing these games.

We have structured the paper according to its research objectives. In the Conceptual Background Section, we briefly discuss the management and organizational literature on strategic thinking. The purpose of this literature review is to conceptualize strategic thinking so we can draw on it to analyze our data and discuss its results. Next, we introduce our ethnographic research approach. Accordingly we describe our data gathering and analysis techniques. After this, we propose a mechanism that describes the process of strategic thinking in WoW. This mechanism is based on a set of hermeneutic themes derived from analyzing our data. We discuss the implications of these results in the section that follows. We conclude by reflecting on the scope, limitations and areas of further research of our investigation.

2. Conceptual background

Definitions of strategic thinking are numerous and we discuss some of them with the purpose of deriving our own working definition which will be the theoretical background against which we analyze and interpret our data. Different definitions point out to the properties of strategic thinking. Accordingly, we found that this type of thinking has been essentially defined as: a method for collecting competitive intelligence (Drobis, 1991); a way for identifying lines of action to achieve specified goals (Stumpf, 1989); an ability to integrate and use available information (Reagan-Circincione, Schuman, Richardson, & Dorf, 1991); a method to find a vision (Reagan-Circincione et al., 1991); an introduction to

designing future of an organization (Zabriskie & Huellmantel, 1991); a way to align daily work of all employees towards a common goal and direction (Linkow, 1999); and “a combination of analytical method and mental elasticity used to gain a competitive advantage” (Pellegrino & Carbo, 2001, p. 376). Mintzberg, Raisingham, and Théorêt (1976) offer a succinct definition of strategic thinking: a sequence of decisions, in which the decision is defined as a specific commitment to action (Mintzberg et al., 1976, see also Heracleous, 1998).

Given the nature of unstructured situations in which strategic thinking occurs, it is argued that it involves the processing of multiple variables and the establishing of relationships among them (Linkow, 1999). These multiple variables are related to different sources of information that can be either external or internal and involve knowledge regarding the values and beliefs of organizational members. The values of organizational members are relevant given that executing a strategy often involves some degree of organizational transformation. Thus, Linkow conceives strategic thinking as the collecting, synthesizing, categorizing, and applying of knowledge from an array of disparate information sources in the pursuit of competitive advantage. Likewise, Liedtka (1998) argues that strategic thinking exhibits two important properties: strategic perspective and strategic intent. Essentially, this means that a strategic thinker has a mental model of the whole system within which he or she has to make a decision. At the same time, strategic intent provides the strategic thinker with the focus required to concentrate on the issue for which a decision needs to be made (Liedtka, 1998).

Thus, from our literature review we can now formulate a working definition for strategic thinking. We propose, then, that strategic thinking can be defined as a process that occurs in unstructured and uncertain situations; that aims at achieving relevant organizational objectives; that involves the analysis and synthesis of information from different sources; and that leads to a commitment to action. Strategic thinking is paramount in WoW since its game play basically consists in a player being involved in fighting the environment as well as other players from enemy factions. A player must engage in strategic thinking to fulfill game objectives. These can be individual such as the completion of most quests or collective such as defeating bosses in dungeons or raids. In any way, the game is designed so that a player without a consistent and effective strategy cannot progress.

3. Research methodology: autoethnography

Through autoethnography, a researcher gains an insider’s perspective that allows him to form an accurate appraisal of the human group under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Autoethnography involves complete membership of the observer in the group being studied. The researcher’s participation becomes “converted to genuine membership [to the group being studying] during the course of [his] research” (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 85). In this way, the researcher immerses himself and grasps “the complete depth of the subjectivity lived experience” (Adler & Adler, 1998, p.85). We argue that autoethnography provides us a rich insight into an MMORPG such as WoW; this is because the players’ interactions with the game occur within the context of the game’s own cultural rules and norms. In addition, autoethnography allows for studying how processes develop through time (Adler & Adler, 1998). Therefore, autoethnography is suitable for research aimed at making sense of phenomena that evolves with time, such as the unraveling of underlying mechanisms of strategic thinking, the objective of our research.

All throughout our experience in WoW we were fully attentive to the fact that our autoethnography differed from traditional forms of ethnography in that we were interacting with our subjects

² When the cited article was written, level 60 was the highest level in the game.

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