

The Development of Social Customs in New Multiplayer Game Environments: Fallout 76

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ABSTRACT

Player interaction in multiplayer games is a topic that has been extensively researched, and many game worlds have their own unique sets of rules, practices and customs for interaction, established by players through shared experience. But what does this process look like? How do players develop these customs within a new game world? In this paper I explore the development of social customs within the novel game environment of Fallout 76. As a work in progress, I make some preliminary claims about the development of social customs early in the game's release, and reflect on the methodological challenges for undertaking this kind of research as a player-researcher in the game world.

Keywords

Phenomenology, social customs, telecopresence, multiplayer games

INTRODUCTION

Established games like *World of Warcraft* have provided researchers with a persistent but evolving space to explore social aspects of player interaction, such as the development of social capital (Williams et al. 2006), and how players develop a sense of community, inside and outside of the game world (Ducheneaut et al. 2006; O'Connor et al 2015). Within multiplayer game worlds of all types, players necessarily make choices about how and why to interact with others, and existing research has thus attempted to unpack what motivates players to interact the way they do (e.g. Bowman, Schultheiss & Schumann 2012; Yee 2006).

Extending beyond the experience of play itself, gameplay is now often livestreamed, reviewed, deconstructed and discussed in game forums, blogs, social and gaming media. A new player that starts in an established multiplayer game, then, has an abundance of resources to draw from in order to learn how to play, and importantly, to learn the social conventions and customs of that game. But how are social conventions developed in a new game environment: one without any existing resources or reference points? How might players establish social customs through shared experience in the game world? What other forms of common practice from other games are perhaps borrowed, and what is the role of the game world (e.g. environment, narrative, controls, rules) in contributing to the development of customs of social interaction within a specific game?

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Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout 76*, released late 2018, allows an opportunity to explore this process as it unfolds. The research project aims to answer the question: what is the typical nature of player behaviour in developing social customs of mediated interaction within the novel computer game environment of *Fallout 76*?

This paper will discuss preliminary findings and some methodological considerations relevant to the project. It considers the research problem from a constructivist perspective, drawing upon a research framework developed to undertake social phenomenology in multiplayer game environments (Scriven 2018). Built on the phenomenology of Alfred Schütz (1967), this framework considers how player actions within game worlds are meaningful, the nature of evidence available to us, and what this can infer about how players engage with the game world and other players within it. The framework is used to inform an ethnography of *Fallout 76* by a researcher-as-player: observing, documenting and thematically coding other player behaviour, movement, and interaction within the game world to make initial claims about the 'typical' nature of mediated player interaction within the rules and narrative of the game itself.

Data collection began during the B.E.T.A phase in November 2018 and continued during the months directly following the game's launch. This allowed the longitudinal capture of data, and the observation of the formation of some emerging conventions of player interaction during the initial stages of the data collection period. It is anticipated that data collection will continue during 2019 to further explore how the game evolves through pending patches and updates, and the ways in which the player base may respond to these. Consequently, this paper is presented as a work in progress.

Initial claims can be made about the ways in which players use the in-game emote system to communicate intention or feeling, and how some in-game communicative actions are borrowed from common practice within the gaming community; the emerging conventions and contexts of player collaboration and hostility within the game world; and the relationship between player character level and typical behaviour. In player practice, these provide the foundations for a set of emerging player customs and conventions that allow players to 'predict' the actions of other players in the game world, (often in the absence of direct or mediated communication i.e. voice chat), and establish how players should interact with each other during different kinds of in-game encounters. These claims are made in acknowledgement of the broader context of the game's release, which cannot be discounted as a possibly influential factor in the nature of the data available to the research.

Overall, there are intersections between common gamer practice, game rules and limitations, game narrative, and player motivation, that contribute to the development of typical conventions of player interaction within the game world of *Fallout 76*. These initial findings may contribute to understanding how players socially navigate new game worlds, and contribute to the development of future research that may explore these themes in greater detail.

BIO

Dr Paul Scriven is a social research lecturer at RMIT University. An avid gamer and games researcher, he has a keen interest in understanding the unique nature of shared experience in fantasy multiplayer game worlds, and how these spaces contribute to new forms of social interaction.

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