PROFESSIONALS, STREAMERS AND AMATEUR PLAYERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY FOR EXPLORING ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOURS IN DIFFERENT WORK-PLAY CONDITIONS

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Abstract

In recent decades, work has been going through a series of transformations leading to the rise of virtual organizations and to the spread of gamification practices. On the other side, also play activities have been going through a process of "workification", with the rise of phenomena such as "grinding" in video games. Nowadays, the boundaries between work and play are blurred, so that the old dichotomies between game and labour do not hold anymore. This entanglement between work and play might shape the organizations and the dynamics of their members, radically. To understand how, we investigate organizational dynamics occurring in a multiplayer video game, as virtual gaming worlds are often designed to replicate complex social structures and serious work ecosystems. We involve Esports professionals, streamers, and amateur players as they differently intertwine "playing" and "working" practices during the gaming activity. Professionals have problems that are typical of workers, like pursuing a remunerated career in the area; streamers invest an emotional labour during live performances in order to attract spectators who economically sustain them; amateur players could perceive their activity as a "second work". An ethnographic study within an Italian gaming community is in progress. We focus on "Call of Duty: Warzone", a First-Person Shooter Battle Royale game which requires players to enact organizational efforts in order to reach the in-game objectives (e.g., defeat the enemy team). The study uses i) semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted in the game environment played by the amateurs, ii-iii) observation of gaming sessions, analysis of online content and semi-structured interviews with reference to streamers and professional, iv) analysis of communication exchanges of all three types of players during the gaming sessions. We expect that players belonging to different categories will enact distinct organizational behaviours and give rise to various organizational structures. A cross-comparison between them, which is missing in current literature, would clarify how different modalities of combining work and play impact on organizational behaviours and dynamics; it could also help both academic and practitioners address the issues faced by current working virtual organizations, by providing insights on how to effectively organize people collaborating from a distance through "best practices" that can be found in games. Preliminary results will be presented at the conference. Since the study is targeted to the Italian context, generalization of the results might be difficult; however, we expect to provide rich insights through the adoption of a qualitative ethnographic approach.

Keywords: Virtual organizations, organizational behaviour, video games, digital ethnography.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the world of work has been going through a series of transformations in the Western world. These changes brought two main consequences, affecting the way work is organized and leading to the rise of new organizational structures, like virtual organizations (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). Nevertheless, along with the spread of such organizations, a series of issues have also arisen (Johnson & Isenhour, 2003): in particular, human resources departments have been more and more challenged by the supervision of a displaced workforce and the management of related problems, for instance how to enable knowledge sharing among the employees (Cramton, 2001).

According to a growing tradition of academic literature, possible solutions to these concerns could be drawn from the analysis of digital gaming worlds (Rapp, 2018b; Rapp, 2020a). This assumption grounds on the fact that video games are often designed to mirror already existing social structures, such as work ecosystems (Lukacs et al., 2009): from games, researchers may gather insights and best practices

that can be transposed to systems which entail non-virtual interaction among the individual, as well as to "serious" virtual environments that entail working practices. Evidence of this "paradigm" shift can be found in the diffusion of gamification practices in work organizations, which have tried to address this novel situation by embedding so-called "gamification" techniques (Deterding et al., 2011) within the work processes (Smith & Kilty, 2014) to train and motivate employees, or even developing ad-hoc video games aimed at engaging employees (Stanculescu et al., 2016).

On the other side, also play activities have been going through a process of "workification", with the rise of phenomena such as *grinding*, namely the repetition of a series of routinary actions performed by the player to advance in the game (Dibbell, 2016), or even to illicit practices like *gold farming*, a deviant activity which involves the sale of virtual in-game resources in exchange of real-world money (Keegan et al., 2010). These dark phenomena are typical of many RPGs (Role-Playing Games) and MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), like World of Warcraft (Rettberg et al., 2008; Nardi, 2010). According to Taylor (2012), the diffusion of these practices shows that the boundaries between work and play are blurring; similarly, the old dichotomies between game and labour do not hold anymore (Goggin, 2011).

The entanglement between the work and the play dimensions may radically affect the organizations and the dynamics occurring among their members, even in unpredicted and detrimental ways. However, there is a scarcity of studies which addressed this particular topic from a psychological perspective. To fill this literature gap, we aim to qualitatively investigate the organizational dynamics which are reproduced in a Multiplayer Online video game: adopting the Mapping Principle (Williams, 2010) as a conceptual starting point, according to which human behaviours in virtual spaces can be similar to their non-virtual counterparts (Ahmad et al., 2014), we pursue the idea that player activity enacted in virtual worlds can be generalized to better understand real world social dynamics (Keegan et al., 2010).

The target of the study is constituted by three types of players, namely Esports professionals, streamers, and amateur players. Drawing from a diversified collection of studies, carried out within disparate area of research (e.g., Game Studies, Sociology, Human-Computer Interaction, Computer Science, Psychology…), we assumed that these players may be considered a reference point, as they differently intertwine "playing" and "working" practices during the gaming activity. In fact, it has already been shown that players engage in gaming sessions differently depending on the way they perceive their activity: as work, leisure, or a combination of both, i.e., *playbour* (Törhönen et al., 2019).

More specifically, professional gamers have problems that are typical of labourers, like developing their skills and pursuing a remunerated career in the area (Taylor, 2012). Video game streamers and content creators have to invest an *emotional labour* during live performances, viz., to actively model their behaviour and manage their emotions in order to attract an audience (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019), as well as to retain spectators, some of whom even support them financially through a system of subscriptions (Walker, 2014). Finally, amateur players have been considered labourers, as they produce economic value (Koutsouras et al., 2017), despite not receiving any income; plus, they could perceive their activity as an obligation or even a "second job" (Yee, 2006).

With the present study, we intend to answer to the following research questions: *How do players organize the game action, depending on their perception of their gaming activity? What characteristics do these provisional organizational structures have*? In addition to that, we would explore a series of sub-questions, which relate to organizational processes such as communication, learning, the management of power and possible enactment of dark practices. For instance, *how do players communicate in the game? What sources do players use to learn how to play the game? How are decisions taken and in what way are wins/loss attributed to the players?* In the attempt to respond to these and similar points, we have been ethnographically investigating the digital gaming environment of "Call of Duty: Warzone", for reasons that will be explained in the next section.

2. Setting

"Call of Duty: Warzone" (or simply "Warzone") is a Multiplayer Online Battle Royale game developed for several gaming platforms and published in 2020 by Activision as a *free-to-play* game, so it doesn't require any payments. Whether they are alone or in group – a squad can be composed by two, three or four members: players' overall objective is to survive until the end, by killing all the enemy players in the arena while a mortal gas cloud shrinks the playable area as time goes by. Battle Royale matches can be played in two different maps, depending on the mode. Default mode is considered more punishing, since players can come back in the game after the second death only if their team "respawn" them by spending money at a Buy Station, while in Resurgence mode the redeployment occurs for the nearly total duration of the match – with the exception of the end game.

3. Method

Given the complexity of the matter and the relatively shortage of scientific production about the topic, we opted for a qualitative methodology, which would help us explore subjective meanings and perspective from the standpoint of the participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016). More specifically, we are carrying out an ethnographic study within the Italian community of *Call of Duty: Warzone*. Building on previous digital reflexive ethnographies (e.g., Rapp, 2020b), the first author has conducted an ethnography in the game adopting a reflexive approach, which values the researcher's experience and considers her subjective experience worthy to be explored (Van Maanen, 2011), thus also entailing an auto-ethnographic work (Rapp, 2018a; Rapp, 2022). Differently from "objective ethnographies", this approach ensures more transparency to the whole investigation (Cardano, 2009; Rode, 2011).

The ethnographic work has been conducted since May 2021. Within this period, phases of participant observation and data analysis were alternated. First, the ethnographer played the game as a participant observer and, as she learned the basics, she began to participate to the online spaces of the community, such as Facebook and Telegram private groups of the game, content communities, i.e., Instagram, Youtube and Twitch channels, and official websites containing walkthroughs and guides of Warzone. After a couple of months from the beginning of the ethnography, the first author joined a regiment, a sort of clan system, which aggregates people who want to share the game experience in a more continuative way, counting about 128 members. In this way she could join and observe matches with different players, take notes of their social dynamics and their daily informal discussions.

3.1. Data collection

In our analysis we have been using different data sources. Generally speaking, observation will be conducted in a participant way on amateur players, while streamers/professional will be observed through their social media channels, which are open to the public. Some of these observations and gaming sessions will be recorded, having the consent of the amateur players. Interviews will be conducted on all the three types of players and recorded to consent data analysis.

During these months, the first author has already been collecting materials in the form of documents, videos, personal experiences, gaming sessions, informal conversations. Observations have been conducted during all the matches that the first author has been participating to, and a number of them has been recorded, with the consent of the participants. Personal experiences are collected through a daily diary, which contains observations and reflections written down after a game session or an informal conversation have occurred.

Interviews will be conducted in the last phase of the data collection. Participant will be recruited by following different strategies, namely: i) involving players of the regiment, which is expected to positively contribute to the quality of data, enriching informal conversations and observations conducted on the same participants; ii) adopting a snowball sampling technique, so to gather gamers having a wider range of experiences. The number of participants will be decided according to a data saturation criterion (Bowen, 2008), i.e., stopping recruitment when the ethnographer will realize that additional data would not produce new crucial findings. Interviews will be conducted via different channels, i.e., Discord, Zoom, and transcribed verbatim. A set of predetermined questions will be asked to the participants, leaving them free to explore unforeseen themes.

A separate discussion is reserved to the collection of social media content. Facebook groups such as *Call of Duty Warzone ITA* and *Call of Duty Italia*, are scanned every day, as they testify the Warzone culture. Public and private groups have been joined to stay updated on the game. Through the exploration of Facebook pages, as well as of Twitter, Instagram, and Twitch accounts the first author can grasp how these players interact with their followers, what are the main topics of discussion and so on. So far, the first author has been following several streamers and watching their live sessions, as well as the video that they uploaded on Youtube. Relevant quotations are reported within the ethnographic diary. Tournaments will be selected and watched to better understand how organizational behaviour occurs during official events.

3.2. Data analysis

The field notes, the informal conversations and the interviews will go under a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012; Saldaña, 2013), adopting an inductive stance (Patton, 1990) for the whole process. The analysis will be mostly conducted by the first author by applying open and axial coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition to that, she will employ a "participant researchers" strategy (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), asking the informants to give their opinion about the line of argument which will be emerge from the analysis. By being part of a regiment, the first author could keep the discussion with participants open, thus preserving all the different nuances of participants' opinions, asking for

questions in an informal way and involving a smaller group of participants that could express their point of view on the preliminary findings in a more critical way.

From an ethical point of view, the privacy of participants and content creators or players who published content over the Internet will be guaranteed as both players' names and game nicknames will be anonymized. Moreover, the members of the regiment are informed of the scope of the research and the role of the first author.

4. Expected results

We expect that players belonging to different categories will enact distinct organizational behaviours and give rise to various organizational structures. A cross-comparison between them, which is missing in current literature, would clarify how different modalities of combining work and play impact on organizational behaviours and dynamics; it could also help both academic and practitioners address the issues faced by current working virtual organizations, by providing insights on how to effectively organize people collaborating from a distance through "best practices" that can be found in games. Preliminary results will be presented at the conference.

5. Limitations

Since the study is targeted to the Italian context, generalization of the results might be difficult; however, we expect to provide rich insights through the adoption of a qualitative ethnographic approach. On the other side, embracing an ethnography approach has "practical" advantages in terms of research. As a matter of fact, observing players interacting in an environment which is relatively easy to access will ensure the collection of "rich" data which would be otherwise complicated or impossible to gather, due to resource constraints or privacy issues.

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