Organizational behaviours in online virtual gaming environments: a digital ethnography

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The Western world has recently witnessed the transformation of the contexts of work and the rise of new organizational structures, namely virtual organizations. This has led the human resource function to encounter a variety of new issues, e.g., how to facilitate knowledge sharing in virtual teams or to manage a geographically scattered workforce.

In the attempt to deal with these problems, virtual organizations have started to embed gamification techniques within work practices and to develop ad-hoc video games with various purposes, e.g., to improve the employees' engagement and motivation. Symmetrically, virtual play has been "contaminated" by features and processes that used to pertain to the work sphere: nowadays, more and more players are engaged in activities that are pursued for extrinsic rewards, such as monetary remuneration (e.g., professional gaming, content creation), over intrinsic ones. However, it still is unclear how this entanglement and mutual contamination between game and labour and between "real" and "virtual" worlds, might affect the organizational dynamics occurring within these new organizations.

The study of online game worlds may inspire research in the field insofar as online video games are often designed to replicate social structures such as work ecosystems. While it would be unwise to assume a perfect overlapping between game and real contexts, virtual worlds do offer an accessible and privileged environment where to conduct analytic observations of organizational dynamics, e.g., players who cooperate, organize, establish formal and informal hierarchies, and generally behave in line with the constraints of the game design.

Grounding on that, we intend to explore the organizational behaviours of subjects performing in different "play-work" conditions, e.g., in terms of leadership dynamics, allocation of roles and responsibilities among the players, motivational factors, and collaborative/competitive dynamics. To this aim, an ethnographic study is under way within the Italian gaming community of Call of Duty, a First-Person Shooter game which demands players to make organizational efforts in order to meet the in-game goals. The research uses semi-structured interviews and participant observation of the gaming sessions.

Participating in the study are three types of players: casual players, video game streamers and Esports professionals. Amateur players may occasionally be considered labourers, since they yield profit to the industry, though without receiving any income; of course, they may find an intrinsic reward in the activity. Video game streamers offer social emotional labour when they demonstrate their skills and behaviour during live gaming performances to attract and retain a community of spectators, some of which may economically sustain them. Esports players are professional workers, who play to develop their skills and pursue a remunerated career in the area.

An observation of and a cross-comparison between these three categories may help expand the scenario on contemporary virtual organizations in both game and work setting; plus, it could provide insights on the organizational strategies adopted by people who collaborate from a distance, as well as their struggles. This study might also help reveal what novel social rewarding strategies get applied in organizational contexts, and how.

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