Placing the blame: Negotiation of gaming performance

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INTRODUCTION

In team based multiplayer gaming, a player's chance of succeeding or progressing hinges on the collaborative efforts of the team members, but also on the individual skill of each of the players, who has to be able to fulfil the roles and tasks designated. Whenever team members fail to attain whatever goal they have set for themselves, it is crucial for them to work out and understand what happened, why it happened and what can be done to prevent it from happening again. In co-located computer gaming, this is, for the most part, done through verbal accounts, where players negotiate about and discuss prior events in order to make sense of what has happened [2]. In these discussions, the players orient to issues such as the rules of the game, their opponents' behaviour as well as their own skills and gaming competencies. Through a sequential analysis of how these negotiations are structured in the players' interaction, the meaning of "following the rules of the game" and what is to count as "competent gaming" can be analyzed as the players' own concerns. Thereby, this paper elucidates the participants' perspectives of their own affairs and the ways in which the social order of a gaming session is a cooperative achievement of the players present [1, 3].

METHOD

The analyses draw on video recorded gaming sessions in two internet cafés. Around 25 hours of data have been recorded in these two locations, using one or two video cameras focused on both the players and their screens. In some cases, camera recordings are supplemented with recordings of the on-screen events, using video capture software. In the session, two or more players are seated next to each other, playing either over the cafés' local networks or the internet. The players are teenage boys, aged 15 – 18 years. A naturalistic, non-experimental approach to a data collection of *in situ* gaming was used [4, 8], where the players organize their gaming sessions themselves, deciding what to play and with whom without interference from the researcher. The data were analyzed using an ethnomethodological and interaction analytical approach [6] where the local configurations of semiotic resources were taken into account [5]. The analyses include both verbal and other modalities of communication in to face-to-face interaction, such as pointing and other types of embodied action. Moreover, they include on-screen action, such as avatar movements and other actions as well as cursor movements and scrolling.

The games played include *World of Warcraft*, various *Warcraft III*-mods, *Rune*, *Counter Strike* and *Team Fortress II*. While many of these games are possible to play as single player games, and in player-versus-environment modes, only player-versus-player sessions were included in the data analyzed for the current study.

RESULTS

The findings show how the players concertedly construct accounts of the causes of why the teams could not reach whatever local goals they had set for themselves. In many cases, this means attributing blame to one or more of the co-players. This player, in turn, will strive to allocate blame somewhere else. This includes blaming "bugs" or "unbalanced game mechanics", but also claiming that adversaries cheat or play unfairly, either through modifying the playing conditions through parameters within the system (like using a cheat code) or through breaking locally negotiated codes of conduct (e.g. *spawn-killing*). The player's priority is to deflect accusations, both explicit and implicit, that they in some way lack the necessary expertise. Overt criticism of a co-player's performance may have grave consequences, leading to that player terminating the game session. Normally, it is only in the light of very strong evidence that a player will admit to playing badly, and s/he would usually attempt to soften the critique through blaming something that will not implicate less-than-competent-understanding *per se*, for example explaining his behaviour as a "lack of attention".

This paper discusses important aspects of the players' own, collaboratively achieved understandings of their game play. It shows how their negotiations function as ways for players to attribute and resist accusations of a "lack-of-competence", which in turn determines what positions in

the players' community of practice [7] that will be available to them.

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