Perspectives

5-1-2010

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Thursday, March 25th, 2010

Online Gaming Can Make a Better World: Jane McGonigal

   After watching Jane McGonigal speak in this TED video I couldn't help but smile inside. I have been a fairly avid online gamer for quite some time now, and it was refreshing to see someone shed positive light on the subject. Most gamers including myself were always confused as to why these games were so enticing and addicting in most cases, but shunned upon by most of our peers. It always left me feeling somewhat confused and depressed about the whole situation, and now with Jane's highly intelligent commentaries about the positive nature of gaming and objective studies to back it up, I can again confidently say that I am an online game enthusiast.

   With personal feelings put aside and sociological theoretical depictions brought to the forefront, it is interesting to compare some of Jane's ideas with that of both Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. The theorist who stood out right away, being exemplified through Jane's positive attitude claims on a much larger, macro-level scale, was Emile Durkheim. Jane's ideas about transcending human's as a resource through the social fabrics of gaming into something that might solve world hunger, poverty, and global warming was nothing short of <u>functionalism</u> at it's best. Jane's platform for social structure and maintaining positive social order is the online world, and online gaming is the vehicle for change.

   Jane sees how societies within the online gaming communities are working more collaboratively and more productively than societies in the real world; and is looking to explain through her research why this phenomena is occurring, as well as how we can apply this reoccurring theme to the real world. She is clearly interested with her research in what Durkheim would describe as the Sui Generis, or the "whole being greater than the sum of the parts". The foundation of the gaming world thus far has been creating more enticing, more exciting experiences, in which players are willing to collaborate and communicate effectively to achieve. She describes these "epic win" scenarios in online gaming worlds that modern real world experiences just can not seem to achieve.

   In Durkheim's <u>Sui Generis,</u> the object of the greater good was the sum of the parts, and these parts require <u>social cohesion</u> involving greater cooperation between individuals in society to achieve a strong social order. In video games, the <u>social order</u> comes from the experience players have to achieve the "epic win" or ultimate goal, which involves teamwork, mass collaboration, and cooperation. With a strong structural system in-place for online gamers, or the gaming platform, this cooperation comes extremely effortlessly, almost flawlessly and without fail. Also, when the cooperation between players doesn't occur, its easy to leave the current situation, pick yourself up from failure and move on to the next scenario. Online players trust that there are plenty of other great players who share similar interests or missions to theirs. They

know from the start that their "epic win", or ultimate goal in the end of each scenario, is well worth the immense cooperation it takes to achieve that win. What is made a very easy task of moving on after failure online is seemingly incredibly hard to transcend into the real world.

In the gaming world players all know exactly what their roles are and they all know exactly what missions to accomplish. In the real world, however, it is easy for people to loose sight of what exactly their goals are, or what missions they have to accomplish. Its too easy for people to get off track from tasks they begin because they loose sight of the rewards in the end. Maybe they start with great intentions for a new plan of action, but change their minds because there are just so many ideas of what is right and what is wrong in our world. This is one of the many reasons why people might lack the same social morality and collective conscience that online video game environments seem to achieve so easily. I guess It would be different if everyone was given an "epic quest" book at birth and was told what to do. How can sociologists find true social cohesion and a strong collective conscience without people loosing their "freedom" to choose? This is a question I will leave unanswered.

It was interesting when Jane stated that "whenever you show up in one of these online games, there are lots and lots of different characters that are willing to trust you with a world-saving mission" which i also alluded to earlier. The <u>collective</u> <u>conscience</u> of the video game world is so strong because online players all have very similar goals, physically and mentally, and uphold similar values within those goals. These goals and missions that players are willing to collaborate and cooperate together within, simply because they share the same goals and missions, creates a strong social cohesion and a unified <u>social morality</u>. This morality, which is the social ties among these online players binding them together to control their selfishness, is created almost effortlessly online, and requires very little maintenance. It is built into gaming platforms that players work together. As 'Durkheimian' sociologists, we would see this unification of players as being a very positive outcome in creating and maintaining social order, and fuel for the greater good of society.

A little more expansion on the topic and moving onto Weber, I did find a few interesting links. One that stands out is when Jane stated her very first sociological fact in that, as a world, "we spend 3 billion hours a week playing online games". This immediately spoke to the <u>Protestant Work Ethic</u> in which Weber outlines as the value of hard and honest work. Online players spend a lot of time playing these games, and they have to work at devoting that much time, even though it might not feel like work. Jane also says "There's no unemployment in World of Warcraft, there's no sitting around wringing your hands, there's always something specific and important to be done". This type of ideology absolutely speaks to the Protestant Work Ethic once again, and is a great example of how much work goes into the thought-processing within gaming worlds.

One last huge theoretical depiction of Weber's that applies beautifully to almost any online game scenario is the idea of <u>rational action,</u> and more specifically value and instrumental-rational action. Almost 100% of the decisions that are made within an online environment will be <u>value-based</u>. That is, they will be made by players to further the conquest of the world or to protect the world in which they live. On an individual level, the players value and aspire to a higher level, gain or achieve experience points, or earn more social renown. These decisions could also be

<u>instrumental-based</u>, where the players will sometimes weigh the cost-benefit analysis between choosing to complete a specific task or abandon that task and move onto the next. Sometimes the next quest will return greater rewards, and therefore the player will focus more time and energy on that quest versus another. These types of rational decisions are consistently made across the online gaming community, and always return rewards without fail. This seems to always be the case online, but rarely the consistent case in the real world. Perhaps human rational action at one point no longer returned rewards or granted us a positive experience, and therefore people were left confused and began to question themselves and their motives, and out of this confusion non-rational action was born.

We have just now begun, thanks to Jane McGonigal, to value the experiences that online gamers are having, and with a critical eye we can begin to see different paradoxes between these online communities and our real-world societies. Her enthusiasm and inspiration on the subject certainly was refreshing, enticing, and exciting to me, and I am sure it was refreshing for many other sociologists. The fact that she has beautifully constructed empirical research to back up her arguments is very impressive. In the near future, with more insightful research and inspiration, we can hopefully bridge the gap between these paradoxes, and begin to create parallels among these online and real world communities.