First-Person Shooter Games as a Way of Connecting to People: “Brothers in Blood”

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Abstract

This work seeks to understand young adults’ motives for online gaming and extends previous research concerning social interaction in virtual contexts. The focus of the study is on Counter-Strike and World of Warcraft. Drawing on Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, an analysis of young gamers’ motivation for gaming is carried out. The empirical data was generated employing a mix of qualitative methods such as researcher introspection, observation, and interviews with young adults in two different online gaming centers in Stockholm during 2006 and 2007. The results show that online gaming is foremost motivated by social reasons providing the gamers with a possibility of cooperation and communication. Some of the gamers in the study were motivated by escapism. Online gaming also provides gamers with an experience in which “flow” can be obtained and serves as a “hallucination of the real,” making it possible to do things and try out behaviors that would be impossible to do or try in real life. The gamers felt that online gaming gave them more experiences than real life could provide. For research purposes, this work provides a better understanding of the motivational aspects for gamers.

Introduction

Virtual worlds are sometimes called hyperrealities. The creation of the hyperreal is one aspect that characterizes the postmodern condition. The theoretical framework used in this study proceeded mainly from Baudrillard’s frame of reference. According to Baudrillard, the hyperreal is a universe of simulation, without origin, without a past, without a future, implying a diffusion of all coordinates (mental, temporal, spatial, signaletic). Simulation is a generation by models of a “real” without origin or reality: a hyperreal in which the simulation begins with a “liquidation of all referentials.” Thus, the hyperreal is something else altogether. If one transfers these theoretical notions to online gaming, it implies a construction of reality forms that have no referents in an objective reality but instead are mediated in abstract realities. There exists an inclination among consumers to construct and to live in the simulation, implying a willingness among consumers to live in virtual worlds rather than in the real or actual world. Simulacrum means a material object representing something. A simulacrum is, according to Baudrillard, the copy without an original” (a copy of a copy), the meaning of which has become so dissipated in its origin to the original that it ceases to be a copy. The simulacrum therefore stands on its own as a copy without a model, a simulated realm that is “more real than the real.”
time; there is no beginning and no end. Baudrillard describes the hyperreal as having simulation value rather than reproductive value. Not an exact but a transgressive truth, which Baudrillard describes as being “on the other side of the truth,” meaning “more true than the true, more real than the real.”

Some researchers claim that electronic media provides consumers with worlds that are continuous makings of the present. These quantitative studies show that between 81 and 88% of gamers are male and that the average age of consumers with worlds that are continuous makings of the present. These quantitative studies show that between 81 and 88% of gamers are male and that the average age of players is 25 to 28 years old, challenging the stereotypical picture of the gamer as an adolescent. However, first-person shooter (FPS) games attract a somewhat younger clientele. The social aspect of gaming is the most important factor motivating playing for many gamers.5

The empirical data for this study was collected using a qualitative approach. Observations were conducted on 15 occasions from September 2006 to February 2007. Twenty-three online gamers (19 males, 4 females) ranging in age from 12 to 26 years old were observed and interviewed. Unstructured interviews and observations were conducted face to face and varied from 30 minute to almost 3 hours. Two thirds of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Living the Simulacrum

In order to understand consumers’ motives for spending time and money on online gaming centers, an interpretive analysis was carried out. The transcriptions and the notes from the interviews, together with the memoranda from the observations, were analyzed in light of the theoretical framework of Baudrillard, which has been used in a rather open manner, meaning that it has worked as a frame of reference, guiding and inspiring the analysis. In doing so, the following themes inductively emerged from the empirical data.

It is all about communication

For many respondents, online gaming was first and foremost about communication: “Communication, it is like this: We talk to each other, over this game. This is Tim’s old man. And I can write to him here. And he can write back” (Peder, 14-year-old male). The communication that takes place when gaming online occurs seems to be of utmost importance for many gamers. The “old man” that the respondent refers to is the avatar that Tim has created to represent him. Togetherness in an online gaming center was perceived as being more fun and more socially rewarding than gaming online in solitude from home. This was one important reason many gamers were paying money to go to online gaming centers to play instead of playing online from a home computer. “At home we cannot play like this—together. Then there are better computers and headsets here. It is nicer to be able to get to town. It is more fun” (Pascal, 13-year-old male). Also, for Cherin, gaming was motivated by the communicating aspects: “I cannot do night ‘gibs’ any longer, since I am too tired to go on; before, I could because of the spirit of community—you know, with friends. If you have gaming as an interest, you can exchange experiences. It is a lot, a lot of communication in the games” (Cherin, 23-year-old female). Gaming was about getting in touch with people. This result is in line with a study showing that the social aspects of playing the online game Everquest were the most important factor in playing. There were a few examples of how gaming was as communicative as talking on the phone: “Instead of calling each other, you can sit down and chit-chat to each other. Otherwise, the phone bills become so expensive” (Adam, 16-year-old male).

Connecting to new people in unexpected ways

Compared to real life, communication in online gaming environments makes people connect in unexpected ways. People who would not normally socially interact are able to do so online. According to Cherin, playing games was something that everyone could participate in, irrespective of age, gender, or profession, “Everyone plays; businessmen play, teenagers play” (Cherin). The encounters that take place in online gaming environments do not have any references to physical appearance; instead, all encounters are possible. What become important are personal qualities like generosity, reputation, and ability to collaborate. The ways that people connect to each other are built on personal engagement and interest. This is in line with the results of a quantitative study with 912 gamers, which showed that virtual worlds allow gamers to express themselves in ways they may not feel comfortable doing in real life because of their appearance, gender, sexuality, or age. Thus, gaming was seen as a way of developing relationships: both old and completely new. Through gaming, people come to understand each other by the way the avatars act: “You learn how to cooperate and understand each others’ personalities so that one can quickly adjust. The personality behind the avatars is revealed in the games. You soon get a reputation. I have a rather good reputation. Mature, fair, nice, helpful, not so interested in profit. Worst to meet in the cyberspace are teenage boys. They have less empathy. They don’t care if they destroy for someone else, they can ruin three, four hours of work, and they can cheat. Older women are best to meet” (Cherin). Cherin told me how she has developed close relationships with a few people online in the virtual world of World of Warcraft. Some of them she is in touch with every day. One person with whom she got acquainted is a 15-year-old boy she met online 3 years ago. Her relationship with him is very special; he is almost like a younger brother for her. Cherin has followed him in his personal development during puberty. According to her, he has matured a lot, which is noticeable online in terms of how his avatar acts in World of Warcraft. He is cooperative and social and shares his knowledge with
Gaming is a feeling

Numerous respondents described the experiential aspects of gaming. World of Warcraft was especially perceived as having suggestive graphics and being built on fantasy, and some respondents spontaneously draw parallels to books in the fantasy genre, emphasizing that massively multiplayer online role-playing games give more profound experiences than do other media: “It is like reading a good book and watching a good film at the same time. It is visual. World of Warcraft contains all aspects of a good book – it captures a whole lot” (Cherin).

Some respondents found the experience of gaming to be beyond both reading and watching a movie: it was something more complete. Several mentioned the joy that games provide them. Many times, when I asked why they played, the respondents said spontaneously that it was fun and exciting. But most importantly, it seemed to be more fun and more exciting than other activities, such as reading a book or practicing sport. They found gaming to be a more all-encompassing experience.

In order to illustrate what motivated gaming, concepts such as more fun, more people, whole lot, and it is a whole world were chosen by the respondents. These responses compare with the hyperrealities that Baudrillard1-2 discusses in which information, technologies, and entertainment provide experiences that are more involving and intense than their real counterparts practiced in everyday life, which are considered to be rather mundane and commonplace. In this postmodern world of FPS games, individuals flee from “the desert of the real” for the ecstasies of hyperreality and the new realm of the world of FPS games, individuals flee from “the desert of the to be rather mundane and commonplace. In this postmodern counterparts practiced in everyday life, which are considered to be rather mundane and commonplace. In this postmodern

network. Then we can play, but here it is more fun. Here we can be many more people. And it is fun” (Peder, 14-year-old male).

Being in cyberspace and acting out in virtual worlds implied that the gamers were acting in environments in which the referents to an objective, real world are missing. This could make the gamers feel lost. It was expressed by one of the respondents as pointless if it was not comparable to real events. “The games give you a special way of thinking. But this way of thinking is nothing without a reality-based understanding of real events” (Cherin). The experience and flow1-2 seemed to be important for motivating the gamers to play.

In another study, similar results were found: that gaming was motivated by the desire to gain power and progress rapidly in the game.4 The games are characterized as having no beginning and no end. They are like a process that you enter at any point in time. However, games reward you for killing as many enemies (e.g., in Counter-Strike, for killing terrorists or counterterrorists) as possible and for reaching a higher levels. Some gamers find games soothing in various ways: “You get joy out of gaming. You can relax” (“Murder_Mo,” 25-year-old male). His girlfriend, who sat beside him when the participant observation took place, was of a slightly different opinion. According to her, relaxation was not the main reason her boyfriend played Counter-Strike: “He gets the aggression out by shooting” (Girlfriend of Murder_Mo, age 25).

Killing together as a social act: Brothers in blood

The social aspects of playing online games have been stressed in several studies as being important for motivating online gaming.5,6,8,10 Teamwork and cooperation in this study also seemed to be crucial for all online gamers interviewed and observed. This was shown in different ways in the games. To be able to unite for common cause was of central importance. This purpose was most explicit in the killing of terrorists or disarming a bomb in Counter-Strike. One study stresses that since gamers of violent games are active participants in violent actions and generally reinforced for using violence to gain desired goals, the effects on long-term increases in violent behavior is greater for videogames than for other media.12 Teamwork was an important part of trying to reach a high level by mutual cooperation and skill in the online game World of Warcraft: “It is more fun to play together. We make plans together. It is a bit like playing football” (Murder_Mo). I was participating while two teenagers, Niklas and Pascal, were playing Counter-Strike one afternoon. The cooperation between the two gamers, in which the older boy was guiding and managing the play, was remarkable. The younger boy was admiring the older boy, and the older boy was encouraging the younger boy in their efforts to chase and kill as many terrorists as possible.


There were two conversations occurring simultaneously. One conversation concerned shooting terrorists in the online
game; the other conversation was about a more profound subject, being assimilated in school: while guiding the younger boy through the game, the older boy confessed that he had problems in school with two boys whom he felt were excluding him, which made him feel like an outcast. Both the antagonists had lived in another city before moving to Stockholm and shared a lot of common experiences from their childhood, which they used to make Pascal, the older boy, feel excluded: “I am really bored. They are talking old memories all the time, making me feel like an outsider” (Pascal). My interpretation of the conversation about online gaming is that it diverted the attention from the profound subject of feeling like an outcast, thereby making it possible to address the subject of being part of, or excluded from, a group in school.

Teamwork and cooperation seemed to be important for all the online gamers I met: “The social aspect is important. It is about striving for perfection, striving to reach the top” (Micko, 18-year-old male). The ability for the respondents to work in a team was crucial. Similarities with football, symbolizing teamwork, spontaneously emerged as important in a number of interviews: “It is like playing football: How much fun is it to make a pass to oneself? That is no fun. From the beginning, it can be fun to dribble a bit, but once you know how to do that, you want to try to play with someone else.” (Benjamin, 12-year-old male). The victory can be mutually shared. That seems to be important regardless whether it is a football tournament or a World Championship in Counter-Strike: “You can say it is like football, exactly. If you are good at it, you can earn money on it. And win World Championship” (Electronics, Marco, and Enis, 12-year-old males). “If you compete well in the game, you get a kick, an intoxication of victory, that you can compare with the one you get when playing football. The same if you play bad, you feel a bit depressed” (Rasmus, 25-year-old male).

During several of my observations I noticed that the FPS gamers had physical reactions every time that they themselves got shot. They sighed or cried out loud, they changed position in the chair, and they interrupted the game. Very often, I noticed that the boys or men whom I was observing raised themselves in their chair when they got shot. It seemed to be physically very painful for them to get shot. Even in a virtual setting, I noticed that the physical reactions from the male respondents of shooting someone else’s character were instead physically expressed by sharing a good laugh together with the other gamers. The aspect of transparency, of being “noticed” and able to show off game-playing skills, in this case, killing, seemed to be of importance: “If you are two people, you can work together. You can see what the other person does, you have witnesses. It becomes more fun” (Murder Mo).

Even though gamers act as avatars in the games, their character often reveals their true personalities by the way they behave. Having a good reputation in the game means that you have the ability to be generous, to share, and to cooperate: “You can trade with people, and this possibility can be misused so that you cheat on people to get something that you need for something else. By cheating, you can get a bad reputation in the games. A good reputation you get by helping each other.” (Micko).

I observed two girls one afternoon as they played Counter-Strike. They cooperated throughout the game. When it came to shooting each other, they had a strategy of their own: “You are not allowed to shoot me. This is so stupid. We play Counter-Strike and I tell you not to shoot me” (Malin, 13-year-old female). When one of the girls unintentionally shot her friend, she even apologized. It was obvious that the two girls were cooperating the whole time even though they actually fought against each other:

Malin: I am sorry. Whoops, I happened to toss away my weapons again.
Jennifer (age 13): Shoot, so I can see where you are hiding.
Malin: Bang, bang (Malin is firing). I do not want to waste my bullets. But okay, will you help me to climb the ladder if I shoot?

Cooperation was inseparable from competing, and the girls found strategies to cooperate in the game even though they were actually competing against each other. Malin even fired her gun so Jennifer could see where she was hiding. And to reciprocate, Jennifer helped Malin to climb a ladder. The girls simply adjusted the rules in the game to suit there need for cooperation. And they were completely aware of the dilemma.

The last resort: A place of refuge

Escapism was motivating some of the gamers. Several respondents mentioned that gaming online provided them the opportunity to get away, to flee from their everyday problems. The gamers could enter a world that occupied their minds and at the same time gave them a valuable break from anxieties in real life. This is in line with a recent study that identified escapism as one of 10 motivating factors of playing online games, indicating that some gamers were using the online environment to avoid thinking about real life problems. Control and relinquishing control were mutual goals, expressed by Rasmus (25-year-old male), when he said that it was about letting the game “grab on to you and absorb you,” thus providing a break from reality. This implied for him that he could take a pause from the troubles and matters he had on his mind concerning his work or spare time. At the same time, he did not want to get too absorbed by the game or to lose control completely, an experience he shared with Cherin: “I can control the games; the games nowadays are not so simple and, for instance, children would not be able to handle them” (Cherin). Control, for gamers such as Cherin and Rasmus, had to be balanced between being in full control and losing their grip of control.

Optimal experiences are gained when the activities require that they are learned and mastered, they have a clear aim, they give the user feedback, and the activities make it possible to practice control. The concept of flow denotes the mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterized by the feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity. Activities that create flow are activities that give the users enjoyable experiences. Some of the respondents described how gaming sometimes was motivated by a desire to be sufficiently absorbed in the story of the game to reach the state of flow: “It is an escape from the world that you live in. If you need to relax or contemplate on some problems you have at work or at home or something like that. Or you enter a game and just let the game grab on to you and absorb you” (Rasmus). Rasmus does not play World of Warcraft because
he feels he could become too immersed in the game. The same desire to reach the state of flow that motivates him to play Counter-Strike makes him actually avoid World of Warcraft. He uses concepts such as “too absorbed” and “that involved” to denote the risk he feels that playing World of Warcraft would imply. Being able to be in control seemed to be important for gamers: “I have seen warning signs among my gaming friends, that some of them have been too absorbed by the game. So they play constantly. And I like a good game and good stories, so therefore I have not tested it—because I do not have the time, the strength, or the energy to be that involved in the game” (Rasmus). For Benjamin (age 12), gaming online gave him a valuable break from the obligations and duties that his everyday life required: “You get some time. This is like a break for me; you get a little break when you can do whatever you want, a break from schoolwork. You can sit in a nice chair, and you get a break.”

Hallucination of the real

Using Baudrillard’s words,1,2 online gaming thus becomes a “hallucination of the real,” a hallucination of lived experience that is both reconstituted and without substance. “It is a lifestyle for some people, besides the ordinary life” (Cherin). According to Baudrillard, “the age of simulation begins with a liquidation of all referentials.” Applying his reasoning means that experiences in these games become as real as in real life without any referential consequences: “It is fun. It is cool. It is a whole world” (Tim, 14-year-old male). It becomes possible to kill in a graphically virtual real environment, without the consequences that a real shooting would imply. This condition is explicit especially in Counter-Strike, in which the gamers chase, track down, and shoot terrorists. The action takes place in tourist attractions, ancient temples, empty offices, Italian museums, deserted deserts, and so on. These environments are well-known artifacts for us in which there are buildings, plants, roads, signposts on the walls, toilets, and other realistic props. Still, these environments imply a new setting in the game because they are completely deserted. There are no civilians present, no cars driving around, no children laughing, and no birds singing. Instead, there is an apparent lack of life in these virtual contexts. Except for the soldiers, one of the few things that remind the observer of the existence of anything living, are the splashes of blood on the walls. And the blood is more a reminder of what used to be alive. The killing that occurs is rewarded in the games, in contrast to the killing that occurs in real life. Jennifer and Malin (both 13-year-old females) were asked what was so fun about Counter-Strike:

Jennifer: To kill. Blood and that you compete towards each other.
Malin: You become stressed. That is fun.
Jennifer: It is fun to play with people you know well. It is fun to kill friends that you spend all your time with. You become a bit tired of each other. Then: Bang.

Jennifer appreciated the opportunity to virtually kill her friend because they spent so much time together that they sometimes got tired of each other’s company. In cyberspace, Jennifer could eliminate her friend without having to take any legal or mental responsibility for the killing, a situation she honestly and fully enjoyed. One study stresses that “in terms of plot characteristics, portraying violence as justified and showing rewards for violence increases the effects that media violence has in stimulating aggression, particularly in the long run.” Another conversation concerned a similar situation. The following conversation ensued when three 12-year-old boys playing Counter-Strike were asked, “How can you survive [being shot]?”:

Marko: Because it is a computer game. Because this is some kind of a fake dude.
Enis: This is rather unrealistic; you can get a headshot and you are still alive. That is fat bad. I mean, in reality, you die after one shot.
Marko: In the game, you can get ten headshots and still live.
Energetic: We are sick when it comes to computers.
Marko: We have a sick mind.
Enis: We are sick computer nerds.
Researcher: “I understand that you win if you shoot as many as possible, but what are these games about, really?
Energetic: They are about killing each other.
Marko: Counter-Strike is based on a real story. In one way... it is about terrorist and counterterrorists.

They are aware that Counter-Strike is what Baudrillard would call a simulacra, signs of media that create the perceived reality with no referential attachment to the real world. However, the boundaries between real and virtual seem blurred, as implied by Marko’s statement that Counter-Strike is based on a real story. This hallucination of the real denotes that for gamers, the virtual is another “real” world.

Discussion

The themes that emerged from the empirical data in light of Baudrillard’s theoretical framework1,2 showed that online gaming among these gamers was motivated by sociality, cooperation, communication, control, escapism, experience, and as a hallucination of the real. Gaming online is not an activity motivated by a wish to be alone, secluded in front of a computer screen. Instead, it was quite clear in this study that the respondents considered gaming to be socially motivated, explaining why the gaming was conducted from online gaming centers. Cooperation, often expressed as hunting or killing together, also motivated gamers to play. The hunting or killing was perceived as a social experience, providing them with a sense of “togetherness” through teamwork.

Communication was stressed as important. The communication that took place occurred at different levels, both concerning the rules of gaming, but equally important was that it provided gamers the opportunity to discuss more profound subjects, such as personal problems in the real world. But gaming was not only about communication; it was also about communication with people in new and unexpected ways, giving gamers a chance to connect with people irrespective of physical appearance, gender, and age. Since virtual worlds replace the real with a simulacrum, the references to reality dissolve. This allows gamers to evaluate other gamers on personal qualities and gaming style rather than on physical appearance. Meetings that take place in virtual worlds could therefore be interpreted as more democratic.

The experiences of gaming were also important, and gaming was perceived as being both encompassing and multidimensional, providing gamers a holistic experience of “being more real than the real world.” Mastering this experience gave them a sense of flow and a feeling of being in control or, to a certain extent, losing control. Gaming was motivated also by escapism, perceived as being a place of
refuge. Online gaming provided gamers a world in which ordinary, mundane trivialities could be forgotten or put aside, a world where they could forget about everyday problems.

Finally, gamers were motivated by a “hallucination of the real,” enabling them to do things and try out behaviors that would be impossible to do in real life. For example, gamers might try out new personas and lifestyles, allowing them to socialize in new manners. But this hallucination of the real also makes it possible to try out behaviors in virtual worlds that are unacceptable in the real counterpart, a concept especially apparent in FPS games. In light of research showing a clear connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children, it is not surprising that parallels sometimes are drawn between violent acts and consumption of FPS games. Since FPS games are constructed without referential connections to the real world, it becomes possible to virtually kill someone in a world “as real as in real life” but without any legal consequences. The killing that takes place in the games is often socially motivated: it occurs among a group of friends competing against each other or in teams. Therefore, playing FPS games can be interpreted as a way of connecting to people, connecting as “brothers in blood.” The implication of the study is that it extends previous research concerning the motivational aspects of online gaming.

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