Profiling as a method of analyzing online gaming communities.

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Abstract: The following text deals with the research of gaming communities. It suggests profiling as a way of analyzing processes among the gaming groups. We understand the process of analyzing groups in terms of building gaming culture, roles within the group, group dynamics etc. In the text profiling is understood as a descriptive tool with certain analytic capabilities. The bulk of the article displays a particular profile of a gaming community – PrM Alliance from Bulgarian server Alpha of Ikariam.

• PROFILE BUILDING

Profiling as a method of research known in the social anthropology and other related scientific fields. It is a case study related tool that checks most of the characteristics of the case study as a method. Similarly to the case study it suggests using different methods for gathering information (Tellis, 1997; Harley, 2004). It is also relying on as much information as possible (Yin, 2011). In a way the profiling is a type of a case study. The main difference is the profile could imply a more systematic data gathering with indicators. Also while normal case studies could be used literally on a case by case approach profile work well in numbers as they have a tendency for being suitable for typologisation and systematization bringing forth overall conclusions and tendencies.

A perfect example of study based on profiles is Daniel Millers (Tales from facebook, 2011). There he works with 2 different cases of people from Trinidad describing their facebook accounts in comparison with their living experience. In this study he speaks of portraits but for our means they function the same way as what we call profiles. The min difference is that in this article we are going to display a group community profile while Miller focuses on personal level in his study.

• DATA GATHERING

Profiling as we understand it in this case relies on lengthy and multiscale process of data gathering, To build a profile we need as close to complete information about the subject of interest in relation to the researched problems. First of all we are building a complete story in relation of the subject. On the other hand we rely on a list of key events that we do not want to miss as that would later affect our analytical options and may lead to mistakes. This is why in the process of gathering data any

source of useful information can be used. In this case the researcher in is taking the role of an investigator who has to build his case. The task is reconstruct the events and be able to build a consistent analysis in relation to the researched topic or problem. That is why we say that profiling or the process of building a profile a descriptive but also an analytic tool.

In the example I display in the next part I am using a profile built for my dissertation project. They may problem is the transfer if communication, relationship and roles between the online and offline sphere of gaming community life. Also the transfers that occur between different online fields. The data gathering methods are: observation, interview and desk research.

During the observation we register different events. They need to be related to the topic but we would rather have a bigger scope and not miss something that may later prove important. In the case the observation is done both online and offline dew to the aspects of the researched object. Interviews on the other hand are important to gain additional perspective on the problem but also fill in the blanks left from the observation. Usually this is clearing the details of different events. The desk research in this case is following gaming forums and other applications that can further supply with useful information.

• THE CURIOUS CASE OF PRIMAERA MAFIA (PrM)

To remember Kalin's name, I have to go to his facebook account. I remember Max, Pipin40 and Lidero, all account names or nicknames he is known for in the online games he plays. The truth is, I haven't heard anyone call him by name, and the nicknames he uses are directly related to the games he plays on the Internet. These games have been an integral part of his daily life and his communication with people for more than10 years. His friends, many of his colleagues and his girlfriend, share his hobbies on the Internet. Therefore, the nicknames he bears have become largely his identity. He is perceived as a leader of the community and is largely influential to the way it functions.

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I have known Kalin since 2006, we met on a meeting of hattrick.org players (Online football game where the players are managers of virtual teams, managing transfers, training and arranging teams for matches). At that time, such gatherings were held every Saturday. The reason for this is that the matches in Hattrick are on Saturday afternoon and the evening after them is a good occasion to discuss things from the game. Many of the contacts between the people subsequently remained active from these meetings. Thanks to these relationships, we can now talk about an example of a transfer of players from one game to another after these people later started playing Ikariam together.

As already mentioned, every Saturday for several years hattrick.org players gathered in Sofia, as well as in Varna and Plovdiv. This happens in the period 2004-2010, when hattrick is among the most popular browser game with 960000 users worldwide and 7000 in Bulgaria.

At that time, Kalin and I were part of the HT Sofia community. Later in 2008, when the game Ikariam started in Bulgaria, some of members of the group formed their own alliance. I{t was called Primavera Mafia (PrM). The reason for this is that at that time the Saturday meetings of the hattrick players were in Pizza restaurant "Primavera" in Sofia. The idea came from Kalin and several other people who formed the PrM alliance. The reason for choosing the name is the fact that the meetings on Saturday have become a symbol of this company. These people have been gathering at this place for years. The restaurant is convenient and accessible in the center of Sofia, but the important thing in this case is the already established tradition, which is the basis of their meetings every week. The name Primavera Mafia is perceived by others because, in addition to expressing a place at their meetings, it creates a gangster-ironic identity of the union, which is perceived positively in the environment.

Starting with the new game, everyone insists all members to be also playing hattrick. The reason being, this is a territory reserved for the people of HT Sofia. Hattrick played an important role in the group's identity at the time. This game is the place where all these people got to know each other and start actively communicating. In this case Ikariam is a continuation of the online life of the community, another place where they gather for a new challenge.

Kalin's role in this process is significant. As a player, he has no greater success than the others in Hattrick. However, when it comes to Saturday gatherings and community life, he is the leader undisputed leader. While recruitment for the union is done exclusively among hattrick players. In the first week only, about 40-50 people gather on the same coordinates to play together under the PrM banner. In this way, a part of the HT Sofia community was transferred from one game to another. In the initial period, the mutual membership in the two communities of the two games is very important, it is the main feature that distinguishes the members of the PrM from all other players.

From that moment on, the Saturday rallies gradually begin to shift their attention from Hattrick to Ikariam. For several years, the group met every Saturday. In addition to Ikariam and Hattrick, they began to play more games, and at one time the total number was 9. Kalin and his friends played together in all or most of the games. They are a community of people who communicate all day on Skype, Facebook or one of the games. The group operates on a virual online level in Hattrick, Ikariam and other games, and in a physical space and time, at the meetings every Saturday night. These two fields together build community life. During the week it is expressed through participation in online events, and Saturday is the time for beer and pizza.

As Kalin became the leader of the union in Ikariam, some people began to call him just "Leader". Others refer to him as Pippincho, as is his oldest account in a hattrick. None of his circle of friends addressed him by his name - Kalin. He is known to everyone by the name of his account in one of the games they play together, or in his role as a leader. To a large extent, his stay in online games has become an extremely large part of his daily life, as his social contacts and relationships are with people he has met and played in some of the games. His girlfriend (later his wife) also played with him in several of the browser's "clickers," as he and his friends called them. The games are played from home, from work and even on vacation. The only place where no browser games are played is the meeting on Saturday night at the Primavera Pizzeria. Later when the pace was closed they moved to another "The Pocket". At these meetings, people drink beer, talk about games, but look with a smile at those who will take out a phone to view one of the games. People think that during the week you spend enough time in online games and activities, and here is the place to meet and see friends in flesh.

Over time, Hattrick's weight drops from the group's interests, people are already interested in other games, and people who don't even know what that game is are welcomed at the meetings. Of course, at this stage Hattrick is no longer a condition for PrM membership. At the meetings on Saturday, various events from the games are commented on, such as battles, wars, development strategies, etc. In some cases even peace talks have been held with other unions in Ikariam after their representatives were invited to the union's meetings on Saturday.

Kalin and his friends perceive their hobbies as games and rarely experience negative emotions towards their rivals. Although they spend most of their time in front of online games, they insist that: "These are just games they play today, but they may not play them tomorrow." Everyone with a smile admits that there will probably be a new game.

In 2013, for many people in the community, Ikariam was not among the interesting activities. At that time, their alliance had developed and was one of the largest in the game. There are a total of 164 people in it, and the core of about 30-40 people living in Sofia most often come to the meetings on Saturday. Despite the presence of so many people in the union, Kalin decides and dissolves it. It is enough reason for him that the game is no longer interesting to him and his closest friends. What matters is the Saturday rallies to continue. That's why he created a new Alliance named "Beer". Its main function is for people to have a place where to organize their meetings. No battles are foreseen and relations with the other alliances in the game are set to friendy. Few months later, Kalin and many of his friends delete their Ikariam accounts completely. They have more convenient platforms where to communicate and have discovered new games to play. They continue to gather every Saturday, but the games they play and the topics they discuss are new. Almost no one talks about the first game they played together - Hattrick.

Like moving from Hattrick to Ikariam also leaving the game Kalin has a very important role. He is a community leader and his interpretation of events is important to others who follow him in the next game. Such a process is normal for gaming groups that operate through common activities that change their interests over time.

Here it is worth noting that Kalin's leadership is characterized by the fact that he manages to attract others with what is interesting to him. In this sense, he enjoys a certain charisma. Being able to define the interest in a new and different activity, he also defines the group of people around him. While at the same time other unions and leaders rely on socialization mechanisms in Ikariam to keep the group longer in the game. A process in which many of the players have long since lost interest, but continue to play, because of the "others". This is a situation in which the game becomes an obligation. Kalin is not interested in this. He values his own free time and that of his friends. When he considers that the game is running out of "fun" potential, and there are other alternatives, he embarks on the next challenge without hesitation. He realizes that staying longer would only lead to a long but sure disintegration of the community.

With this approach the community moves again to another field of browser games. Of course, the composition of the group has some changes, not everyone has played together since hattrick, but most of the people play together different games for years. Unsurprisingly there are new people they have met in the new games, as well as some who have stopped coming regularly to the meetings.

Kalin is a clear example of a well-integrated person who has a career and a family, and at the same time manages to find a large amount of time to spend in a variety of online games. To a large extent, the way he and others perceive him is related to his way of life. In his case, we can talk about the transfer of both the relationship from one game to another, and to a large extent the intertwining between online and everyday practices and relationships, which become something common and inseparable. The relationships generated in the games form a very real community with their own physical meeting places. In turn, these meetings become something that is maintained. To make this happen, there are new games that support the community. Battles, victories, and other successes in games matter in the beginning, when authority and community boundaries are formed. Subsequently, their importance weakens. This is the leading role of Kalin, who with his authority interprets the events and guides the others, has the ability to define the boundaries and activities of the group.

The general activity in online games is an important socializing factor in his environment. Friends, colleagues, girlfriend (later wife) share these activities on the Internet.

Kalin and his community of friends spend much of their free time playing online browsing games. Their community functions through their shared online activities and their meetings every Saturday night. The games they play are an occasion to get together and get to know each other as people from one environment and community.

Over the years, they have gone through dozens of games, which they call "clickers" and which they play together. After a certain period of time, when the respective game loses their interest, they redirect their interest to another, thus, as one "nomadic tribe" passes through different territories, which in this case are online browser-based games.

This process becomes like a habit for the particular group. At one point, its members did not attach much importance to specific games. At the same time, their community as a process functions around the play of such "clickers". They try and switch to new games, that gives them a reason to continue to communicate actively with their friends. They reproduce this process of testing and moving to a new one when they begin to feel that previous games have nothing more to offer them as a gaming experience. After all, for most members of the group, Saturday meetings and the opportunity to communicate online during the week are more important than individual games.

• APPLICATION

As we can see from the above profile we have a narrative descriptive approach. Something similar to a history lesson in school the profile allows us not only to follow facts but to draw conclusions and follow tendencies. In away displaying a single profile is contra-productive as unlike normal case studies where conclusions are drawn on case by case study profiles allow to follow more closely for typological tendencies applying for different cases. Said in other words profile work better in numbers as they are more suitable for comparative descriptions. Yet in this case we say the potential a profile has as a tool.

As far as applications go the example displayed shows how not just single players can be an object of profiling but complete groups and gaming communities. This may be used not only for browser games but across different gaming platforms. In a way this is an ethnographical approach to gaming communities. With all its advantages the method comes with few disadvantages. It suggests relatively lengthy research and multiple data collecting methods what is not always a possibility.

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