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Title: Talking about games. Gamers' digital communication spaces as the object of study

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Abstract

In the digital environment, gaming is one of the activities that has generated the greatest number of fans (Sánchez-Navarro, Aranda and Martínez-Martínez., 2015). What is more, gaming becomes a topic of conversation between gamers/users, who leverage the potential of different communication platforms to research, collaborate, share tips and even boast of their achievements. This article seeks to describe and analyse how these gamers' communication environments work, on the basis of the inherent characteristics of communities of interest, learners and practice. Through examination of the activities on gaming forums for two highly popular massively multiplayer online (MMO) games—*League of Legends* and *Minecraft*—and the exchange of comments between viewers of leading Spanish youtubers like RevenantL0L and Vegetta777, we analyse users' behaviour, the amount and content of messages and compare the structures and workings of the two environments.

Keywords

Gaming, gamers, communication, learning, community, YouTube .

Introduction: the video game as cause and object of interaction

In the current media ecosystem, digital games generate great interest (Sánchez-Navarro, Aranda and Martínez-Martínez., 2015). The consumption data supports this affirmation. In Spain, the percentage of users of video games is 44% (ISFE, 2017) and its use is especially significant among the youngest population (Aranda, 2017). The video game is presented as a featured leisure option within the media system (AEVI, 2017).

In addition to the popularity of the videogame as a cultural industry, it generates an implication, interest and passion that condition the player's relationship with the game but also with other players. The participation model of Calleja (2011), which includes, among others, the shared and the affective dimension, highlights the commitment that is created between the player and the game. His model consists of two temporal phases: 'the first, or micro, representing moment-to-moment involvement during gameplay, and the second, or macro, representing a player's participation in spaces and times outside of the relationship with the game, and their long-term engagement' (Aranda, Sánchez-Navarro and Martínez-Martínez 2016: 9). Gaming becomes a topic of conversation between gamers/users, who share tricks, recommendations, information and news

around their object of entertainment. Passion and interest link them and they feel the need to exchange knowledge and collaborate.

Playing can reinforce social bonds (Goldstein, Buckingham and Brougère, 2004) and the video game works, in this sense, as a way of socialization (Jansz & Marten, 2005). In addition, in the current digital environment, where communication spaces and connectivity options are multiplied, 'a new dimension is opened in which social media can be one more tool that facilitates the interaction of the participants' (Martínez-Martínez and Sanz-Martos, 2018:16).

The participation and commitment are features that distinguish fans from other types of audiences (Cavicchi, 2007). Also, production and creation are elements of the fan culture that shape media consumption experience (Jenkins, 1992: 45- 46). Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington (2017: 2-3), after noting that the recent changes turn into a fandom 'commonplace experience', underline that 'representations of fans in mainstream media content have at times shifted away from pathologization to a positive embrace of fans' vital role for contemporary cultural industries'. The study of the video game from the perspective of the fan phenomenon understands that the digital game is a media that favours creative participation. Wirman (2009: 177) even talks about co-creativity where the players are also mutual co-producers.

The three types of participation that have been mentioned (shared, affective and creative participation) favour the appearance of communities where emotions intermingle with the creativity and the exchange of information or knowledge.

The community around the video games

A group of people who communicate and exchange content on a platform does not necessarily make up a virtual community. The term, in the digital environment, was coined by Rheingold (1993:5) who defines it as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'. In a community, therefore, cohesion and commitment are indispensable in the construction of a common identity. According to Henry Jenkins (2006:27), 'these new communities are defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments (...). These communities, however, are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge'.

In turn, research on virtual communities allows for identifying characteristics that distinguish them and for talking about communities of value. According to Sanz-Martos (2012), the cohesion factor, the size, the leadership type and the time limits are some of the features that allow distinguish this type of communities, including communities of learners, communities of interest and communities of practice (table 1).

	Leadership type	Cohesion factor	Size (no. of people)	Time limits	How virtual?	Meeting schedule
Community of Learners	Moderator/dynamizing	Learning	20-25	Until the knowledge has been acquired	Completely	None
Community of Interest	_____	Interest	100-500	As long as interest lasts	Completely	None
Community of Practice	Moderator/dynamizing	Sharing professional practices	50-80	As long as its members' interest and commitment last	Completely	None

Table 1: Sanz-Martos (2012: 80- 81).

Related to e-learning and even to the origin of the World Wide Web (as a tool for communication between scientifics), communities of learners allow students, according to Onrubia (2004), to learn through participation in a collaboration environment. A community of practice, for its part, is defined as a 'group of people carrying out the same activity or profession who, concerned with a common issue or moved by a common interest, gain greater understanding of and expertise in this issue through ongoing interaction' (Sanz-Martos, 2012). Finally, according to Henri & Pudelco (2003: 478), in the communities of interest, 'members take part in the community to exchange information, to obtain answers to personal questions or problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, to share common passions or to play'. Although the users of communities of interest learned by the communication exchange, they aren't related to the educational field, unlike the communities of learners. The shared interest that connects them is not the professional practice that distinguishes them from the communities of practice. Astrong and Hagel (2000) argue that another distinctive feature of the communities of interest is the mutual unfamiliarity of the members. Here, interests are renewed, which makes these communities very long-lasting, and the members are replaced easily.

In the case of videogames, the approach to player communities as learning communities prevails in the literature. So Gee and Hayes (2010) talk about the acquisition of technological, social and emotional skills. "For these authors, video games' contribution to learning is not limited to the mere act of playing, but also embraces the engagement of players (and particularly female ones) in true communities of learners" (Aranda, Sánnchez-Navarro and Martínez-Martínez, 2016: 16). In the same sense, Wirman (2009: 177), when approaching the analysis of the multiplayer games, affirms that the 'communities between users/publics are being created in the same act of playing', although the interaction is also possible outside the game. Contreras et al. (2014: 83), in the study of multiplayer games, also define them as communities of learners and emphasize that 'emotions are part of the learning process'.

Even though it is true that in these player communities the exchange of knowledge can be very high (and is materialized, for example, in the creation of guides) and their members learned, it is necessary to deepen each situation to assess its defining characteristics.

Methodology

Our goal in this article is to approach gamers' digital communication spaces and to analyse them to identify and classify the communities that may arise around them. Specifically we look at the activity arising from two different games: *League of Legends* and *Minecraft*. These case studies have been chosen for their popularity, number of players and trajectory:

- *League of Legends (LoL)*, created by Riot Games and released in 2009, is based on the concept of game-as-service. It has an atypical economic model that is related to the close relationship with the players: it is free-to-play, but a small part of its players pay for optional items and they are loyal buyers. The reach is, therefore, fundamental for the model (Alexander, 2014). *LoL* is a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) and, with professional competitions, it is known as an eSports game. With millions of users and more than a hundred of characters, the gamers play by groups and fight to conquer the territory of the enemy. The game is also catalogued within the modality of the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA), as a characteristic element of this typology are the character's traits and personality. In these games, communication between players is essential in order to coordinate actions. The metagame thus becomes an essential element to understanding the relevance that *League of Legends* has acquired.
- *Minecraft*, created in 2009 by Markus Person and the company Mojang AB, offers an open world (an almost infinite sandbox) in which the player can not only explore but also build and modify the space. It is a type of game in which the elements, when interacting with others, acquire new meanings (Frasca, 2001; Flanagan, 2003). A defining feature of *Minecraft* is that it leads to the experimentation and the development of the user's creativity through the combination of different elements or materials. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Minecraft* communities develop creative uses and modifications. In *Minecraft*, in addition, the player can face challenges and even enemies through the different day and night cycles that occur in the game. *Minecraft* offers different game modes. Thus, besides survival and creativity modes, the gamer has the option of participating as a spectator.

In our research, the communication spaces that we analyse are the forums of the Spanish-speaking community linked to these games, specifically from the official website and a premium server: leagueoflegends.com and mundo-minecraft.com. Also, the interactions (user comments) on channels of the main Spanish youtubers, according to subscriber data and publication of videos related to these games, are examined. In this case, the selected youtubers are: Vegetta777 (8,680,758 subscribers and 177.85 million views in the last month); RevenantLOL, (749,343 subscribers).

Minecraft	
Forums http://www.mundo-minecraft.com/foro/	Interactions on the Vegetta777's YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/user/vegetta777/
League of Legends	
Forums https://boards.euw.leagueoflegends.com/es/	Interactions on the RevenantLOL's YouTube Channel https://www.youtube.com/user/RevenantLOL

Table 2: Sample of analysis.

The study, whose preliminary results were presented at an academic and research meeting (Sanz-Martos, Navarro and Planells, 2018), is part of the project: "Playful culture, digital competence and learning" (reference: CSO2014-57305-P) financed by the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness. The analysis was carried out from June to October 2017. In the case of the forums, we observed the activity registered in the last two years. In the case of YouTube channels, after the search of the last videos published by the youtubers and related to the indicated games, the comments published by the users of the channel are analyzed.

The analysis is qualitative, descriptive and, specifically, we observed the dynamics of participations, interactions and content of the messages exchanged. Based on these characteristics and taking into account the narrative universe and peculiarities of the videogames that motivate the interaction, it will be determined if the attributes of the communities of value are fulfilled (Sanz-Martos, 2012).

Results

The analysis of the communication spaces allows observing singularities in terms of management and dynamics of the participation but also in the degree of interaction and the contents of the messages exchanged. These aspects are relevant from the perspective of community configuration.

- *Structure and dynamics of participation in communication spaces*

In the analysed forums, participation is more organized because in both cases there are norms or indications on the use of the forum that mark the intervention dynamics, thus, for example, "Universal rules of the forum" in the case of the official website of *LOL* or the indications contained in the "The beginner's guide" in *Mundo-Minecraft*.

On YouTube there are also conditions of use, although these are generic to the platform and not specific to the analysed channels. Likewise, the forums identify different profiles of users with different privileges, including those who are in charge of

moderating the conversation and who are in charge of offering certain guarantees of order in the interventions.

Regarding the participation requirements and because of the link to the download page or to an official server, in the forums (both in *LOL* and *Mundo-Minecraft*) you need the registration and / or have a user account of the game. In the case of *Mundo-Minecraft*, it is indicated that the requirement to be part of the community is to have a Premium account. On YouTube, any user registered on the platform can participate by publishing content. In this case, it is not even necessary to be a subscriber of the specific channel. This marks a substantial difference in the feeling of belonging in both communication spaces.

The forum of the Spanish-language *LOL* is particularly active. With more than 500 users, it is broken down into specific subject areas (table 3) . All of them are presented with a highly useful description. For instance, the description of the “Runaterra in Spanish” sub-forum explains:

‘The perfect place for talking about the Spanish version of *League of Legends*. Come on in, give us your opinion and share your ideas with us, be it to talk about the dubbing of your favourite champions, share your thoughts on the names of aspects or just to inform us of the odd slip-up in our translations. Your opinions count!’ (Runaterra in Spanish, *nd*)¹.

The Spanish *Minecraft* community has more than 500 members too. The *Mundo-Minecraft* sub-forums (table 3) are not as structured as those of *League of Legends* but the subject matter is very similar. Also, it includes two sub-forums not related to *Minecraft* but with the video game, and there are even repeated denominations of sub-forums (as for instance, “General”). Another substantial difference between the two communication spaces is that the sub-forums of *Mundo-Minecraft* do not have a description as detailed as in *LOL* of what each thread is about. In both cases, *LOL* and *Minecraft* forums, users can create discussions or new topics in these sub-forums.

Forums and sub-forums of <i>LOL</i>		Forums and sub-forums of <i>Mundo-Minecraft</i>	
Where start	to Forum rules Guide for beginners	Community forum	Welcome, farewells and absences General News Technical problems

¹ The quote has been translated from the original version in Spanish.

The Game	Champions, features & game Lore & art Runaterra in Spanish	Official server of the community	General Rules /tutorials Bulling /Selling Cities Anarchy world Survival world Monuments /Creations /projects Suggestions Technical problems /help Reports Community videos Quests
Community	Announcements General discussion Humour & Games Recruitment Behaviour Forum suggestions	Oficial wiki	Wikimineraft.es Technical problems
Competition	Clash Storm Circuit eSports	Minecraft	General Creations Mods and utilities Textural packages Videos Help
Creative area	Cosplay Creations & concepts Streams ans videos	Off-Topic	General Other games
Help	Help & support Bug report Red Tracker		

Table 3: Forums and subject areas of the sub-forums².

In the YouTube channels, the titles of the videos help the experienced player to recognize the sequence and the content of these videos. Although it is from the playlists where the contents are grouped by game, season/series, which facilitates its location and tracking by allowing users to save them. The video, in which usually through a fragment of the game you see how the youtuber faces a challenge, a patch is explained or a character is presented, is the trigger for the comments published by the users.

² Denominations have been translated from the original version in Spanish.

- *Contents and interactions*

In terms of interaction, forums can register from just a few to hundreds of comments, and the user who opens a topic or discussion often intervenes again in the conversation. In the YouTube channels, the interaction is higher, even some cases exceed a thousand comments, although these interventions are mainly given by users who watch the videos. The participation of youtubers is limited in the comments space. In fact, Vegetta777, in the information about his profile, explains that he responds ‘in a random way but, as much as I want to respond to everyone, it is physically impossible and I really tell you that I would like it’. On the other hand, something common in all cases is that the interactions and participation of users can be valued or voted .

As regards the content, the rules and guidelines of the forums already advance the nature of the messages that can be found. So, the ‘Universal rules’ of LOL reports:

‘This space moves around a key concept: Play with sportsmanship. Here we will talk about how to foster a healthy community and the discussions will revolve around the systems of behavior of the game (as honor) as well as suspensions within the game. Here among all we will give help and advice to other players in order to help them improve in the future’. (user 1³, *nd*) .

In *Mundo-Minecraft*, “The beginner’s guide” includes a specific section about the web and the forum that states:

‘The forum of the server is used to publish cities, monuments, projects, inform about events, report infractions, make suggestions, curiosities, photographs of funny moments ... In short, it is used to share your experiences on the server with all community’. (user 2, *nd*) .

Paying attention strictly to the contents, it is observed that these descriptions correspond to the observed interactions: In the forum of LOL, The information shared by the members of the community is varied. Thus, in the forums, they can find from notices about events, news and promotions to other useful contents such as tricks and strategies. The creative area highlights. There, players can talk about their creations but also ask for tips to make streams, broadcast videos and create channels related to the game.

³ In this article, since the comments are chosen at random and only for the purpose of illustrating the analysis, in the interactions, in order to maintain the anonymity of the contributions, the participants have been identified as “users”.

The user comments have been translated from the original version in Spanish

The interaction and commitment between the members is also observed in the answers offered to the users who formulate their doubts about certain elements and actions within the game or even skills of the characters. Some examples:

Example 1: “Can a skin appear on the craft just after arising? That is my question. If anyone knows anything, please inform me a bit about the subject. Thanks” [user 3,2017/09/05] . Answer: “As soon as it is active in the normal server, it can already be (with the exceptions of Victorious Skins or that are achieved with special methods)” [user 4, 2017/09/05].

Example 2: “[...] I’d like to know if someone can tell me where I can find the champions’ stories” [user5, 2017/03/14]. Answer: “They should have some for you here, for example: http://universe.leagueoflegends.com/es_ES/champion/karthus/#funeral-en-el-mar” [user 6, 2017/03/14] .

Example 3: "Doubt: Ornn and the Ursine. I have a series of doubts regarding the relationship between Ornn and the Ursine. (...) If Volibear and Ornn are brothers, is Ornn also a Ursine? What made him renounce his tribe?" [user 7, 2017/08/24] . Answer: “Easy, the lore of Volibear is outdated. Like many stories changed when the vastaya appeared, with the departure of Ornn and the theme of the demigods will also change the stories of some Freljord champions, such as Volibear” [user 8, 2017/08/24].

The discussions in *Mundo-Minecraft* have some similarities with the forum of *LoL* in relation to the type of content exchanged: you also can find advertisements and news; threads in which the users share advice, rules and tutorials; indications to solve technical problems; and own creations among which can be found even replicas and real monuments that the players build.

The forum of *Mundo-Minecraft* is presented as a space in which doubts can be expressed and where the players also collaborate to help other participants and improve the game experience. These examples allow illustrating the type of messages exchanged by the forum users:

Example 1: “(...) In this Post, I want you talk about Minecraft, about what things you would add in the game (in the versions), and explain a bit what and why. (...)I start:

- 1) To improve the Minecraft floor (....)
- 2) To add a little emotion: we will create volcanoes, earthquakes, storms (rain and sand) or meteorites, things that may create the need to add effects and armours to cover you (...)
- 3) To improve the Redstone: The redstone, there are practically no changes, and always cut the things that users find. Maybe it would be time to make an update, and add more machines (...), that allows us to make a bigger evolution in terms of mechanisms and age.
- 4) Minecraft Ages: This is easy, how long do you take to get a diamond armour? I think minecraft would benefit from being a bit slower, and you have to investigate to be able to generate more materials. So you have to use the experience to improve your skills and be able to evolve, and be able to manufacture with iron, with gold (...). In my opinion, it would give us some extra hours of fun and of strategy.

5) To improve the Villagers (...) Maybe, add something similar to "Comes Alive", where the villagers have more work, have a better interaction and can defend themselves.

I hope your ideas and your opinion" [user 9, 2017/05/01] Answer: “ (...)One thing that always bothers me is to use the stone tile for the floor that is very good but when you want to create stairs there are no stone and you have to make brick or rock spoiling continuity and aesthetic (...) . [user 10, 2017/05/01]

Example 2: “Hi everyone, as you can see, a few days ago *Minecraft* changed its cover. This new change has also meant that the steps to follow to change your skin have become outdated and so I’m posting this to make it easier for newbs and not-so-newbs to change their skin”. [user 11, 2016/05/28]. Answer: “(...)What collection of tutorials to change the skin we already have. (...) If you are interested in a fairly complete guide, go to Guide for new Minecraft skins” [user 12 2016/12/18] .

Example 4: "good afternoon, (...) I've gone on a very long holidays and the only computer I have is one with the windows 10 operating system.... I downloaded minecraft from its main page (minecraft.exe) and did not let me play (...). [user 13 2017/07/21] . Answer: The problem you mention is that you have downloaded Minecraft for the official version of Windows 10, this version is not compatible with the lifelong Minecraft servers (the one that uses Java) since the version of Windows 10 uses a different programming. (...) [user 14, 2017/07/21] .

Unlike in the case of gaming forums, viewer comments are not structured by subject nor are there behavioural norms. They are simply comments that arise with regard to each new video uploaded by a youtuber to their channel and they usually comment the watched fragment.

These comments are normally addressed to the youtuber offering different kinds of suggestion or recommendation. For instance, in the case of Vegetta777’s videos, most comments rate the video and encourage the youtuber, expressing to other viewers how they liked it:

Example 1: “Your Vidio’s so dope! Amazeballs!”. [user 15, 2017/10/10] .

Example 2: “Great video vegetta I’ve already given it a like and subscribed vegetta you’re a star”. [user 16, 2017/10/10] .

Example 3: “Like if you realised that the jailer was the wizard from Clash Royale”. [user 17, 2017/10/10] .

Example 4: “Like for the gods and his great work”. [user 18, 2017/10/10] .

In other cases, the comments are on some doubts as to how he carried out certain actions. Some examples:

Example 1: “vegetta the barrier is an invisible block that in survival [mode] can’t be broken and you do it with a command to the gods they must of forgot it say hi to me please :)” - [user 19, 2017/10/10].

Example 2: “Vegetta I’ve got a theory and it’s if when you enchanted yourself with that constellation it enabled you unlock those abilities if you enchant yourself with others constellations you might be able to unlock more abilities than those you’ve got now.” [user 20,2017/ 10/10] .

Example 3: “Vegetta, try to look for the constellations depending upon the positions of the moons that are on the constellation parchment you want to find I think that’s it, under the constellations it’s got a number of moons, these are the positions of the moon in which they can appear”. [user 21, 2017/10/10] .

There is scarcely any communication between followers. Only in some cases, comments receive the response of other users where they value, expand or rectify the information offered. In the case of the followers of RevenantLOL (*League of Legends*), we have found slightly more interaction than in that of Vegetta777 (*Minecraft*). For instance, in the case of RevenantLOL, from a comment, the following responses from other users are recorded:

Example 1: “Reve, when you hit the first target with the Q, the range (so to speak) resets: in other words, if you hit the first target at maximum range, you make the Q double in range, it’s really useful for poking and farming from a really safe area” [user 22, 2017/10/10].

Answer: “Yes, but the problem with that is if Lissandra’s Q’s range is shitty (and the first projectile’s hit box is too), it’s not like Jinx’s W, which has a slight impact outside the ability’s maximum range, but is a projectile that literally stops one pixel from a minion’s face it doesn’t fragment and that’s really fucking annoying XD” [user 23, 2017/10/10] .

Answer: “Yes, but with a straighter trajectory, Bard’s Q sometimes does slightly strange things!”. [user 24, 2017/ 10/10] .

As can be seen through these examples, in some cases, there is no respect for spelling or punctuation rules or netiquette.

Conclusions

The study allows to conclude that there is a differential behavior depending on the communication space in which the players participate. Taking into account that the cohesion factor (Rheingold, 1994) is an essential element to be able to talk about community, it is necessary to emphasize that the feeling of belonging is intensified in the spaces of the forums due to the close link with the game / server and the need to be registered in this. In the *Mundo-Minecraft*, this integration becomes evident when there is even a sub-forum through which the members of the community identify themselves and even inform if they will be absent for a while. On the other hand, on YouTube, the cohesion factor is blurred in an open environment to the participation of any user of the platform, where it is not necessary to be subscribed to the channel, and due to the fact that even usual users can be interested in some games or others being the central focus of attention of the subscribers the activity of the youtuber and not necessary a specific game. It is through the follow-up of the playlists that the specific taste for a game could be observed.

In addition to this difference between the registration or the identification as a follower, the interaction observed in the forums allows us to speak about a community of interest according to the defining characteristics of the communities of value identified by Sanz-Martos (2012). We emphasize three features: the volume of users; the longevity of a community that remains even in spite of the change, substitution and / or entry of new members; and, finally, the common interest that manifests itself in the exchange of information about the game: from news, tips, tricks and shortcuts to other strategies. So the interest in the topic, the video game, remains despite the relief of the members of the community and, although a gaming users tends to be grouped into teams of acquaintances, the gamers can find in the video game's forums the epicentre for the exchanges of messages and informations about it.

In the case of youtuber viewers studied, we cannot talk of a community, firstly, because there is no cohesion factor, as we have already commented. Also the lack of interaction between followers means that there is no feeling of mutual commitment. As previously noted, a community is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships and, in the process, develop a sense of belonging and commitment. Furthermore, in the process, they build relationships based on respect and trust, and feed the sense of a shared history and their own identity.

The possibilities for continuous learning are a common feature of all the different communicative environments studied. In any case, there is no comparison with the exchange of information and experiences that takes place in the two games' forums, which really can be regarded as communities. So, the learning and knowledge exchange taking place in YouTube comments complements that in those. Although the number of viewers and the chaotic arrangement of the comments hamper the existence of the basic criteria for communities, such as a mutual commitment; it is unstructured and there is also a clear lack of the principle of netiquette and of the niceties of the rules of spelling; it cannot be denied that users share and exchange knowledge, and they undoubtedly learn.

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