The Inadvertent Construction of Leaders in Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an in-progress qualitative research project looking into leadership in digital spaces. It consists of semi-structured interviews of individuals who took positions of leadership in digital games, focusing specifically on those identifying as women, non-gender, or persons of color. It analyzes how their experiences in leading their digital organizations in games led to the development of leadership skills and job opportunities offline.

Keywords

Leadership, Qualitative Methods, Digital Games, Digital Communications

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, major leadership positions remain consolidated amongst a very specific type of person, specifically in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Increasingly it is becoming apparent that greater efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lead to greater representation and overall success in large organizations, but these efforts are often stymied by a variety of factors. One such factor is that when a person identifies as a woman or a person of color, they tend to not perceive themselves as a leader or skilled in leadership (Schaumberg et al. 2012). New technologies for communication such as voice-over-IP (VoIP) in games, remote meetings over Zoom, even virtual reality (VR) meeting software in the "meta-verse" offer an opportunity to enhance inclusion of these groups and increase the opportunities for leadership positions and development of leadership skills.

Because of the ability for an individual to construct a social persona (Milik 2017) in digital settings, there is a weaker (but still existent) bond to offline social roles. In online organizations, membership is quite fluid; mostly the work of volunteers who are expecting pleasure or fun from their experience. This creates a need to fill a leadership position more regularly, and in the relatively anonymous and objective-oriented digital game space, many people who don't feel they are "natural leaders" end up doing the job.

This study interviews these leaders and investigates whether the digital context of their experience caused them to perceive themselves as more of a leader and whether it had improved their leadership skills in the offline world.

METHODS

The main research question for this project is: does the virtual nature of digital communication, specifically in digital games, create an avenue for the growth of leadership in minority populations? Secondly: are the minority individuals who become leaders online already have similar positions in the offline world, do they have leadership skills that have been unused until their game, or did they learn leadership from their digital interactions?

Data was collected for this project by consolidating interviews taken for other projects between 2015 and 2023 and follow-up interviews in 2024. Participants were initially recruited through individual outreach based on their membership in major organizations in digital games and their presented identity as a woman, non-gender, or person of color. Leaders include guild and raid leaders in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), CEOs and fleet commanders in *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003), and clan leaders in *Clash of Clans* (Supercell 2012). Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. A total of 20 interviews were analyzed.

After transcription, coding was done through categorization analysis (Hester et al. 1997). Claims was generated through grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and connected to gender theory after the fact (Lindqvist, 2021).

FINDINGS

Results in this study have been consolidated into three main threads: A lack of desire for leadership by the individual and the feeling of being forced into the role; a sense of stress and being undercut by other members; and finally, a sense of recognition of the value of their labor after the fact.

It was very common for participants to state that they would have preferred to not be leaders in their organizations. While some said they "want to do my own thing and be left alone" and that "didn't want to deal with drama," others didn't want to compete with the social expectations that "I get ignored because I'm a girl." This seemed to follow traditional gender and racial norms, with women and persons of color specifically mentioning wanting to not have their "offline" identities known by others in the game. Regardless of their hesitation, these leaders "just fell into it" or were "forced to step up" either because of their performance in-game or because a different leader disappeared and needed to be replaced. In one case, they took the position while still not disclosing their gender to their guild mates.

A majority of these leaders had already left their leadership positions at the time of the interview. This isn't necessarily uncommon for digital labor (Terranova, 2013), where turnover is high in general but seemed relevant given the expression of extra pressure these respondents felt based on their identity. Most of them expressed feeling "burned out," "stressed out," and not "wanting to argue with [sexist] idiots." Overall, the stress and departure seemed consistent with any "hardcore" digital game player of an MMO game (Bergstrom, 2019), but it is worth noting that a few specifically mentioned moving into less demanding (or in one case "more anonymous") roles.

Interestingly, although many had left the role in the game, there was clearly a trend that participants had picked up other leadership positions in other organizations,

either in the same game, a new game, or in their offline identity. This leads to the last point, where these respondents, now having experience in leadership, feel that they have a skill set that they did not claim to have previously. One respondent said that "I wouldn't have even applied for" their new managerial position at a university, and another commented that "I'm still surprised how relevant *WoW* is to my job [in management and education]."

These findings suggest that systems that encourage "forced" leadership in digital games create a social good for the players, and potentially for all organizations through an increase of leadership-seeking individuals of all backgrounds.

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