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## **Real and virtual social circles. A sociological analysis of role-playing games participants.**

### Summary

The thesis had three objectives. The first, descriptive, assumed the ethnographical description of functioning of enthusiasts of traditional role playing games as well as massively multiplayer on-line role-playing games. The second objective was to understand how participants of role-playing games social worlds organise their activities within their social worlds framework. The third was to understand how fans construct borders of their social world and how spheres of hobby and everyday life affect each other.

The work's theoretical perspective is situated within the interpretive sociology framework. To understand the functioning of fan communities the author used Florian Znaniecki's concept of social circle, social world theory along with theories of neo-tribalism and bund. Since the core of fan activities are games, there was a need of reaching for some concepts developed within game studies, thus the employment of three frames described by Eric Zimmerman: game. culture and play.

The research was of the ethnographical nature. The methodological basis was provided by an anthropological thick description and clinical interference along with sociological grounded theory. Information concerning player communities functioning was collected during the one year observation in one of the Sub-Carpathian fantasy clubs and saturated by data gathered during fan conventions. Observation in MMORPG communities were carried out with the use of so-called netnography. Next stage of the research was conducting of 40 in-depth interviews. Data was saturated with visual materials and text produced by fans.

Comparison of functioning of both variants of role-playing communities allowed to state that they differ with possible degree of agency. In case of traditional role-playing games every element may be set through discursive means while the MMORPG game play is strictly subordinated to the game structure constructed by developers.

The entirety of fans may be analysed as neotribes, social circles as well as a social network, which theoretical perspectives may in fact be treated as complementary. In functioning of fan communities areas of lesser and greater intensification of activities may be identified. The latter are particularly clubs, voluntary associations and Internet portals constituting a kind of network nodes, points of exchange, in which production, exchange and consumption of



cultural text is performed. These areas constitute bunds, the centres animating activities of whole community. Authors and audience remain in close relationship, often performing both functions thus relations in the fandom are close to these existing in traditional communities.

The fandom makes place not only for entertainment but also for secondary socialisation. Functioning within its framework occasionally requires establishing relationship with formal organisations while many initiatives, despite their ludic character assume forms similar to these of "serious" life activities. Role-playing games enthusiasts constituting clubs, voluntary associations, organising convents acquire abilities required in everyday life. The most important conclusion is that apparent escapism associating with role-playing games with the help of competent community animators may be converted to the actual socialising and educational factor.