Avast: Social Networking and Complex Economies On the High Seas

Anita Greenhill
University of Manchester, a.greenhill@manchester.ac.uk

Gordon Fletcher
University of Salford, G.Fletcher@salford.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2008

Recommended Citation
http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2008/221
AVAST: SOCIAL NETWORKING AND COMPLEX ECONOMIES ON THE HIGH SEAS

Anita Greenhill, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, A.Greenhill@manchester.ac.uk

Gordon Fletcher, Salford Business School, University of Salford, G.Fletcher@salford.ac.uk

Abstract
This paper examines the activities and economies of YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates. YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates is an online role-playing game that draws upon puzzle-orientated gameplay to construct a social world. This paper addresses the important issue of social networking in information systems. It is a theoretical exploration of the deeper issues and implications that social networking has for business models in organizations. The paper explores how technology as a communications medium can present a continuous series of events centred on the exchange and manipulation of technologically constructed objects. Very little academic research in the Information Systems field has considered the interplay and mutual interdependence of spectacular events with the routines of everyday life. Discussion of organisational activities often overlooks the fact that the labour aspects of everyday life are repetitive and mundane and instead prefer to discuss environmental context and the social networks of the most readily identified users. By offering the gameplay of roleplaying and puzzle games coupled with the opportunities to create social networking bonds in roughly equal proportions YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates introduces complexity through its economic structure and the need for a range of different social interactions. Rather than being a disincentive to the participants the free market and complex economy of the game is, in fact, its central attraction. This fully articulated economy provides a sophistication that enables a variety of 'everyday' activities and social distinctions to be embedded into the environment including notions of mundane labour, the shifting foibles of fashion and social hierarchies of authority and power. Examination and interpretation of YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates offers insight, as a social laboratory, into the interplay of events, labour and power within a complex economy. This, in turn, provides an alternative perspective to existing Information Systems work regarding the relationship of individuals to systems.

Keywords: MMORPGs, Online Games, Social Networks, Labour, Situationist Theory
1 SOCIAL NETWORKING AND GAMING

The profusion of research into social media offers an existing strong body of work from which to explore social networks in computing. The majority of this work (e.g. Adler & Kwon 2002, Chen 2005, Ellison et al 2007) develops a broadly sociological perspective that emphasises engagement and interactions. Most of these papers are cast within a generally critical research but utilitarian approach with an underlying implication regarding the generally positive aspects of these interactions. In many ways these observations do not disentangle the generally self-selecting nature of social networking sites, i.e. a participant within a social networking site is present because they are intending to be socialable. In contrast, discussions of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) cast a sometimes less positive tone over the interactions and associations that develop in these environments (Shah & Romine 1995, 86). The warfare orientated basis for most MMORPGs results in the need for at least some of the ‘other’ participants to be in some way aggressors. More positive discussions of these environments look towards the formations of guilds within the MMORPGs and their internal operations to find positive social engagement. The tribalism of these environments, however, necessitates that the everpresence of conflict with mutual association (Fletcher et al 2006). In both these examples of digitally enabled environments there is a level of ‘primitivism’ – a term we use in the sense of simplicity rather than with any colonialist overtones.

In this paper we address the important issue of social networking in information systems. Contextualising the issue of social networking in the Information’s Systems field enables important cross-disciplinary exploration of the themes of digital uptake as they relate to social, organisational and technical fields. Inter-disciplinary study enables a theoretical exploration of the deeper issues and implications that social networking has for the business models of organizations. While the Internet offers a rich environment that facilitates a complex series of socialities, we argue it is not necessary to devise ever more complex or technically structured analysis to such phenomenon. Instead, analysis of existing continued practices of daily routine and everyday life will reveal core social interactions useful for modelling organisational practice. Including those imperfect renderings of meaning that are most often reinforced by existing hegemonic power relations and therefore detrimental in social and organisational practice, managers and Information Systems designers can better understand the social context in which these networks operate.

Social networking spaces and MMORPGS are constantly developing in their sophistication – the introduction of FaceBook applications is a particularly successful example – however, they are orientated around a single core purpose. Facebook is ultimately a way to enable the broadcasting of individual identity to lost ‘friends’ and associates. The applications that have subsequently developed are primarily mechanisms for announcing more details about one’s self in more and more sophisticated ways. Thomas Fletcher’s “Interactive Flash Wheel”, for example, visually maps an individual’s friends on FaceBook and how many of those friends are also friends with each other. MMORPGs have a similar singular focus as social networking systems; however, in the case of the former the rationale for social engagement is based around a specific set of strategies to achieve the outcomes of gameplay defined by the original designers.

World of Warcraft, one of the most regularly cited MMORPGs is based around the common Dungeons and Dragons genre with a range of roles and species available to participants. Features and tools that have developed around these types of games are offered to improve the chances a player has of success, and of gaining experience. Mods, addins and macros are considered to be part of a players arsenal of tools while some of the third-party tools offered for World of Warcraft and similar games are considered to be exploits and contrary to the games’ terms of service (world-of-warcraft-gold.com/world-of-warcraft-cheats.html). The development of guild systems is the other significant social modification to the original MMORPG concept. By joining a guild, weaker players are able to improve, while stronger players can benefit from collaboration as it enables them to defeat much stronger characters in-game.
YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates (Y!PP) offers an unusual combination of gaming and social networking environments by featuring benefits and developments that are richer than the sum of these earlier component systems and concepts. Y!PP has both continuous loosely defined gameplay and social networking components that broadly operate in parallel with each other. There is a mutual dependence between gameplay and social networking, in that one requires and reciprocates the other – in other words it is a system. This approach also means Y!PP has a close heritage with the so-called ‘Social MUDS’ such as the early TinyMUD (Shah & Romine 1995, 236). MUDs or Multi-User Dungeon were initially developed with a text setting (like a description from a novel) which allows users to interact with their environment and with other users. Structurally, MUD’s are made up primarily of descriptions of real and imagined areas such as forests, dungeons, offices, universities, cities, rooms, or any other spatially oriented environment. Users can navigate through and examine these settings, and can communicate with other users within the context and confines of the particular setting of the MUD. Social MUDs such as TinyMUD were developed more as a social environment than a game (www.moock.org/muds/starterkit.html). In many respects Y!PP is an example of a contemporary Social MUD. The interrelationship of social networking and gameplay is brought together through Y!PP’s economic system that is integral to the entire environment. The goal of Y!PP gameplay is to acquire Pieces of Eight (PoE), effectively gold coins – and are the game’s virtual currency, which requires a range of forms of collaboration, in a manner that is not dissimilar to MMORPGs’ guild systems. However, the need for social association and affiliation goes further and enables individual players to easily change affiliation and roles in order to achieve a better income. In other words Y!PP does not require a continuing or steady allegiance to a specific sub-group of the social environment. From an economic point of view this fluidity reflects the structures of a market-based economy which, in effect, is the basis for Y!PP’s gameplay and economy. The wider-ranging social network of Y!PP is also reflected in the third-party tools/addins/systems built around Y!PP. Radio Free Cobalt, an online radio station, ArrBay, an auction site for items, and Pirates Community Trader with Bleach, a type of commodity price ticker all suggest a complex and rich economic environment that facilitates, in turn, a complex series of socialities.

In this paper we utilise the situationist concept of the event (Greenhill & Fletcher 2007, 3) to interpret and understand the social meanings of Y!PP and the relevance of studying these environments in the context of information systems research. The situationist position identifies and explores combinations, situations and occurrences that have persistent significance to a social group as shared meaning-making and identity-making constructions (Urry 2002). Wars, inventions, rituals, ceremonies, births and deaths are all examples of the core elements in the construction of shared meaning and are vital for the establishment of individual, as well as social, identity. The situationist approach is useful for understanding Y!PP as it enables identification of an element of the gameplay that is usually left unacknowledged in information systems literature – the mundane and repetitious aspects of social interaction in the form of direct labour irrespective of provenance. Complex free market exchange economies also model other aspects of everyday life that enable understanding of parallel environments. This “social laboratory” perspective has already been acknowledged by Lofgren & Fefferman (2007) in the context of World of Warcraft and the “corrupted blood” plague that infected the game in 2005. This event brought (virtual) fatal consequences to the social networking games that was reported by the BBC 22nd Sept, 2005 , “A deadly virtual plague has broken out in the online game World of Warcraft” (Ward, M, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4272418.stm). Analysis of the social responses to this in-game situation has arguably enabled more detailed response planning for biological plague situations. Similarly, nothing prohibits other gaming environments, including Y!PP, offering guidance and understanding of wider social phenomenon including economy and sociality.

The paper progresses in the following manner. In the preliminary section of the paper we have looked into the concepts and principles of social media and social networking, before moving on to discuss how the latter extends the theoretical foundations of the social and in particular the significance of everyday life. The paper then presents the results of our investigation, providing examples of everyday life practices within Y!PP and the significant impact they have within their communities. In
conclusion, we discuss the significance of practices of daily routine and everyday life for within the context of socially networking. Despite the phenomenal popularity of social networking in organizational contexts, there has been relatively little applied research carried out on this topic. Social networking is a significant area of contemporary research and we explore the issues and implications that social networking has for organisational business models.

2 YOHOHO! PUZZLE PIRATES

The various reviews for Y!PP reveal the core features and appeal of the game to its estimated 2 million registered users and 30,000 paying subscribers (Schubert 2007). Navarro (2005) describes a, “Massively multiplayer online puzzle game. Those are the only possible terms you can use to properly describe Yohoho! Puzzle Pirates, one of the weirdest and most original puzzle games we've come across in quite a while… Imagine a persistent online world where people's little avatars - essentially Lego people in pirate regalia - sail the open seas, sword fight with one another, swab the decks, and even get in a few friendly parlor games, all through the magic of simple puzzles derived from some of the best concepts out there, like Tetris and Bejeweled. Now throw in a cutey art style and a community chock-full of crazy people who want to talk like pirates, and you've got a pretty entertaining experience all around.”

Krause (2004) more directly identifies the economy of the game as a key aspect of Y!PP. “One of the more interesting features of Puzzle Pirates is its fully player-driven economy. Player labor is responsible for all items in the game, from ships to swords. Governors of islands issue deeds to players to have shops built, which are then constructed, again, by player labor. Unfortunately right now only one of the shops - the distillery - has a labor puzzle associated with it. The distilling puzzle is quite fun, but in order to play the puzzle, you must find a distillery that is hiring. The player owners of the shops decide whether they want to hire or not and set wages. Players who take jobs in shops will affect the speed with which goods are produced. Some things, like wood and iron, are foraged off deserted islands and sold to the player shops (or they can be bought from markets). The player shops then turn those things into something usable and sell them to players or other shops.”

The game is orientated around earning Pieces of Eight (PoE), the game’s virtual currency, by either jobbing with one of the various navies - one of the safest routes to monetary success as a financial reward for your efforts is guaranteed - or by joining a pirate band to raid and pillage. Pirates are not guaranteed any reward for working on a ship but when a ship is successful the amount each pirate receives is usually higher than pay from navy work. As a sailor or pirate on a ship, labour is achieved by playing different puzzle games. Depending on the size of the ship there are a variety of stations that ask the sailor (or pirate) to perform a different task such as bilging, carpentry or navigation. Some tasks require that the sailor (or pirate) is more skilled and the game will prevent an unskilled labourer from undertaking skilled tasks. The speed and accuracy with which the games are completed has an impact on the performance of a vessel. Failure to bilge rapidly will fill the ship with water and slow the vessel’s speed of travel. Similarly, if a vessel has sustained damage those players undertaking carpentry must work quickly otherwise the bilging task becomes almost impossible. If a vessel has a poor navigator, navigation is one of the advanced tasks and requires the purchase of a badge, this will result in the ship drifting and missing islands or other ships to pillage. It is the actual playing of the puzzle games, which constitute the basis of the labour tasks in-game, that reviewers have tended to focus upon. The full scope of activities available to players is much more expansive and in many respects playing the puzzles, in effect labouring, becomes the most mundane, albeit necessary, aspect of the game (Figure 1).

Arguably, the most mundane activity of all is the gameplay associated with sword-fighting. Despite the swashbuckling and romantic label the game is a graphically updated 2-player or team version of Tetris (Figure 2). Good sword-fighting skills is important in the game, and like all the tasks, players are rated on their abilities. Player’s rating also determines which pirate crews they will be considered to join. Better vessels will tend to have a captain who will be choosier and have more tightly knit...
crews than those composed of primarily new players. All of the games and the activities associated with being on a sailing vessel are contextualised to reflect the pirate theme down to the chat among players who will use terms like “me hearties” and “yar” quite regularly, admittedly these interactions are seeded by bots who possess entirely ‘piratey’ vocabularies. This observation may appear to be trivial but it is this heavy themeing and the preparedness of players to engage directly and constantly with the theme that contributes to the immersiveness of the game.

As players acquire PoE through their labours they are able to buy a wide variety of goods. It is also possible, on the non-subscriber free-to-play oceans, to buy Doubloons. A Doubloon costs approximately twenty US cents and enables the developers to provide free access to the game in an economically sustainable way. Doubloons allow players to more rapidly advance in the game by buying more expensive items including ‘badges’. Badges are required for most activities that are not directly associated with the basic labour of sailing on one of the ships. For example, a labour badge is required to work in a shoppe, however possessing the badge only enables a player to be employed by a shoppe-owners, it is not a guarantee of employment and in more difficult economic periods on different islands work can sometimes be harder to find. Like many of the objects in the game, badges deteriorate over time forming, in effect, a subtle type of income tax.

One of the primary items for purchase is a variety of clothing items. These items reflect an unintended aspect of the game, it has become a highly fashion conscious place. Some items, such as certain types of boots and hats are extremely expensive and require the owner to have large amounts of disposable income (Figure 3). The players appearing ‘in rags’ have generally lost their money in the gambling parlours that are found on most of the populated islands. This raises some issues about the access of minors to what are, in effect, games being played for money. The exchange of currency for Doubloons does not automatically imply that the purchaser will head straight for one of the parlours, however, there is equally nothing preventing a player from doing this. In fact, to play games in the parlour on days that they are not free requires the purchase of a Parlour badge costing around 4 Doubloons. The presence of minors in Y!PP becomes most apparent when players break out of the pirate theme and reconnect those around them with experiences of the ‘even more’ mundane. For example, during a pirate expedition the captain of a ship announced to the assembled crew that he would be putting in to shore “for a bit”, as “Mom, is calling me down for my dinner.”

The game is generous with a low cost to entry through the free oceans that provide the initial basics needed to participate. Players start with a minimally respectable pirate outfit of cut-off pants, a top and simple boots but as with normal clothing these items and a number of others in the game eventually wear out and require replacement. New players have a single ability that enables them to progress in status and wealth through the game; their capacity to labour. This produces a situation where it is visually possible to make some immediate judgements about an individual’s wealth and position.

---

Figure 1: Labouring at Carpentry   Figure 2: Swordfighting
within the game. A player can be judged without conversation or direct social engagement by examination of the activities they are engaged in, what they are wearing and their other material possessions.

Figure 3: Current fashions in Puzzle Pirates  Figure 4: A painted and upgraded shack

Beyond the pirate fashion stakes, the other way that players can spend their hard-earned PoE and visually raise their social status is through the furnishing of their homes. Each new player receives a shack on a random island that is complete with tattered curtains but unpainted and without furniture (Figure 4). A player must buy paint and a paintbrush (which also wears out over time) for their shack from an apothecary shoppe. After this they are able to buy furniture from one of the furniture shoppes.

All of this activity results in a range of secondary services and careers that support those working on the naval or pirate vessels. The differential price for commodities on different islands makes trading an attractive option for earning PoE. The third party tool, Pirate Commodity Trader with Bleach (pctb.crabdance.com), encourages players to examine the current prices of items from across the game in a reporting style that echoes conventional trading rooms. The tool often reveals major discrepancies in price, for example Yellow Paint (on 29/11/07) had a sell price on Viridis Island of 5 PoE but was being sold for 114 PoE on Sakejima Island. Commodities also require manufacture and some players choose to purchase a labour badge that permits them to work in one of the many shoppes. Ultimately, some players take this route even further and purchase their own stall or shoppe – taking profit from the shoppe’s activities rather than labouring. Shoppes and stalls also pay taxes to the island’s fort or palace. Unlike conventional taxes – that fund government services - the game designers require this type of payment within the economy of the game in order to prevent rampant inflation, activities that take PoE out of the economy and thereby avoiding continuously devaluing PoE are described as “PoE Sinks”. Inflation was a significant issue during the earliest experiences of the game and this became so bad that it was difficult for new players to the game to build up sufficient wealth within the economy to fully participate.

The designers have now mapped the games economy to explain the complex interrelationships of commodities and PoE (see below Figure 5). This map offers a macro-economic view of the environment. There are also a number of other minor PoE sinks found within the gameplay. The most frustrating of these – especially for players who stick to pirating roles – and one of the closest references to World of Warcraft-style gameplay is the “Ghost Ship” that is belligerently manned by 99 gamebots who will attack on sight and inevitably win after a prolonged sword-fight, stealing any accumulated booty from the attacked ship in the process.
3 SITUATIONISM, OBJECTS AND EVENTS

Our interest in the Y!PP environment is not specifically focussed on the economy of the game but instead on the way that specific situations and events, both spectacular and mundane inter-relate with specific artefacts that similarly range from the rarest to the mundane. By taking this approach we disentangle the impact that these artefacts and events have upon in-game cultural practices. This situationist perspective offers the researcher unparalleled capability for critical consideration of the political meaning of artefacts. However, as a limitation to the approach, it does require in-depth immersion into the environment, familiarity with its cultural practice and prolonged observation even in virtual terms. It is in this sense a true qualitative study. Most importantly, is the way that artefacts are utilised in ways that resist, extend or conflict with the designers’ original purposes. The mapping of the Y!PP economy (Figure 5) articulates the ‘expected’ use of major individual items and their relationship to one another and major events. This mapping also reveals, by implication, the overall interplay of ‘everyday life’ within the Y!PP environment. The roles that players can assume and the labour that they must perform are largely revealed through this map.
This study illustrates the significance of artefacts within everyday life and adds an additional dimension to the already complex debate regarding the relationship between people, artefacts and organisations. The examination of role-playing games enables a fresh examination of the reasons why and how organisations form. As with business organisations, groups of players must necessarily come together and support one another to benefit from the gathering, accumulation and distribution of artefacts. Within most traditional examinations of organisations this importance of artefacts is disregarded. The extent of this oversight is emphasised in the observation that “organisations need people” without acknowledgement of the corollary that organisations also require artefacts. Sensitivity over accusations of technological determinism also impedes sustained investigate of artefacts in an organisational context with the simplistic assumption that talking about ‘things’ ignores human agency and assigns a priori significance to the artefact. We claim, therefore, that ignoring artefacts implies a tacit support for the conventional meanings and hegemonic forms of power with which all artefacts are intertwined. Examination of a game environment enables this interplay of power and things to be understood ab initio and invokes one of the key advantages of digital environment as social laboratories. Artefacts are pivotal aspects of everyday life that clearly define and limit what can and cannot be ‘done’. Many of the theoretical difficulties regarding the examination of artefacts are resolved within a material culture context with the founding principle that all artefacts are necessarily and continuously defined and shaped by human action.

Situated within the parallel intellectual traditions of Material Culture studies and the critical theorisation of artefacts is the work of the Situationist movement. While the situationist oeuvre of thinking is expansive and somewhat incoherent we focus specifically on the concepts of the event and spectacle (de Bord 1994; de Certeau 1988; Plant 1997; Lefebvre 1992; Baudrillard 1993, 1993a). The event is a key aspect of the complex potlatch of the mundane, the integrative blend of moments that constitute everyday life, the non-linearity of experience, the illogic of expectations, the indeterminant acceleration and deceleration of personal temporality and the moments of the unexpected or unforeseen. Events are not solely experienced as spectacles and the spectacular (de Bord 1994) but also as identifiable moments of mundaneity and the commonplace. Each event is shaped by specific context and circumstances that defines and forms it. Event orientated research and its exploration in the context of social networking provides valuable insight for managers and Information Systems designers developing business models within organizations.

Everyday life is punctuated by individual movement between and through events. In an organisational context, the mundane is commonplace and represents the ‘routine of work’. In Y!PP, everyday life is hallmarked by undertaking never-ending puzzle tasks, looking for work in shoppes or on ships and checking the noticeboards of individual islands. As participants in these routines of Y!PP’s everyday life, players are drawn to the spectacular and spectacle of ‘other’ events to offset these routine events. Spectacular events of Y!PP can range from blockades of an island, an encounter with the “Ghost Ship”, navigating to a new island, exploring a deserted island for firewood or iron, playing ‘parlour games’ and meeting new people. Regular and planned spectacles also shape the Y!PP experience – including “free” day within a game parlour when there is no cost to play a particular game on two specific days of the week. These crafted and heavily-managed events reinforce the power of the game’s designers. The notion of free parlour games or the required purchase of a parlour badge is clearly connected to the generation of revenue for the game servers/designers but it also produces a sequence of events that exist between the most spectacular and the most mundane. Irrespective of the designed intentions of any given event as a PoE Sink or a revenue generator, by being drawn to spectacular events players assimilate and participate in the political and economic messages and meanings that these events embody.

Artefacts are intimately tied to event-driven culture and its relationship to mundaneity. Everyday life is predominately conducted through a regular and planned series of events.

The intertwining of events, artefacts and human interpretation, combine to shape our experience of social networks and information systems. In particular, crafted and managed events reinforce and define existing hegemonic power relations within the game (or an organisation) - although all events
have this influence to a lesser or greater degree. It is through human interaction and participation that
we are drawn towards spectacle and thereby actively contribute to the power relations associated with
these events. In Y!PP this power is expressed by the influence of the games designers altering and
‘tweaking’ the gameplay as well as the social hierarchies facilitated by the ownership of badges and
the varying levels of control over other players that these provide. Everyday life is punctuated by
individual movement between and through events – in Y!PP, the mundane is commonplace and is
represented through the routines of labour; the playing of the various puzzle games and the need to
earn PoE. Players – even pirates - participate in these routines of everyday life and therefore are drawn
into maintaining existing hegemonic power relations. While this observation may be seen as an overly
negative critique of Y!PP, it is the ‘playing’ at these relationships that makes the gameplay and
concept of Y!PP so compelling and popular.

Artefacts are artefacts because they have been imbued with meaning by a social group or groups
(Hodder 1995). A significant aspect of being ascribed with meaning is that artefacts can at least
partially convey meaning without the presence of a third person (or the original inventors). Human
meaning construction exists as a fluid and imprecise form of communication that requires shared
cultural knowledges and interpretation. In this way artefacts are a form of proxy for direct human
presence. It is also the mechanism that allows artefacts to be conduits of hegemonic power
perpetuating and passing meaning to others. Despite the general imperfection of communication
between artefacts and people it is the meanings of mainstream hegemonic power that are most readily
communicated in these exchanges as modes of hegemonic power are the most pervasive and most
regularly reinforced through a network of shared cultural knowledges. These theoretical consideration
are articulated in a ‘fun’ manner in Y!PP by, for example, enabling players to use a particular colour
of clothing to reflect a constructed social relationship or affiliation (Figure 3) or to decorate their shack
to reflect specific historical periods. The presence of a high fashion stakes that enables a player to
casually comment “Nice boots” to another reveals some of the fluidity of meaning that can be attached
to an artefact beyond the meanings of the original creator.

Continued practices of daily routine, in everyday life reproduces imperfect rendering of meaning and
most often reinforces existing hegemonic power relations. We argue that it is at the junctions of
meaning creation between human interaction and artefacts that we can challenge and critically
evaluate the politics of things in games and equally within organisations.

4 CIRCUITS OF EXCHANGE

There exists a breadth of theoretical positions from which to explore social networks in digital
environments. The use of the theory of social spaces is a growing concept in many socially oriented
studies of Information Systems. However the focus in the majority of these studies has been placed
upon the sociality rather than the spatiality or situation of the study (see Kvansky & Trauth, 2002). We
posit that it is theorists who recognise the significance of object and event within economic and
cultural life that are the most useful in disentangling the social network. Malinowski’s *Argonauts of
the Western Pacific* (1922), as an early example of social networking research, offers some significant
comparisons that brings together object and event into a structure that simultaneously recognises the
importance of social space and that social space is itself produced through human action (Lefebvre
1992). Recognising social space as a product of our lived daily lives, we argue, contributes to an
interpretive understanding of an Information System (Greenhill 2001).

Social construction as a philosophical position is based on Heidegger’s writings (Zimmerman 1993)
and Heidegger as with Lefebvre attempted to move away from Cartesian intellectualism. Cartesian
intellectualism states that “being” is understood as a belief system implicit in the minds of individual
subjects (Held 1980, 227). Lefebvre in his call for nuanced understanding of social space posits that
this space is active, not as an objectification or an enclosed entity, but as a lived activity. Therefore
space is the production of shared action. Zimmerman (1993) explains shared action, as “a way of
being which constitutes a shared agreement in our practices about what entities can show up and, 'likewise' humans are not entities but the clearing in which entities appear”.

In reality, social space ‘incorporates’ social actions, the action of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act. From the point of view of these subjects, the behaviour of their space is at once vital and mortal; within it they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions; then they perish, and that same space contains their graves (Lefebvre 1992, 285).

Conceptualisations of social space that embrace Heidegger’s notion of humans always being in the world is a dynamic and changing space that is dependent upon the continual daily lives and subjectivity of the people who construct it (Held 1980, 227). Social space does not have to be consciously worked upon but occurs through the construction and reconstruction of the daily activities and shared happenings of people. The differentiation between social construction and social production is therefore interrelated – an observation that can often be unintentionally lost when discussing social networking and gameplay. The interrelationship between the objective world and subjective position of humans is connected. As Berger and Luckmann (1966, 55-6) state “Social order is not part of ‘the nature of thing’, it cannot be derived from the ‘laws of nature’. Social order exists only as a product of human activity”. Importantly however, Berger and Luckmann (1966, 55-6) contextualise this understanding and argue that, “Human being is impossible in a closed sphere of quiescent interiority. Human being must ongoingly externalise itself in activity” be this in mundaneity, in ‘social networking’ activities or in the movement from event to event. Hence the main vehicle for conveying social meaning is through shared symbols, forms of cultural myth such as the “Ghost Ship”, the structure and practice of our institutions including ‘free’ parlor days and our rules for congruent action. These vehicles of meaning together construct worldview, sense of ourselves, identity and purpose as well as ideologies. Our selves, our societies, and our institutions are in a continual state of change through interaction.

In contrast to this human oriented use of social space there also exists a variety of studies that use an environmental focus to examine online communities. Ruhleder (2002) explores the online community as a set of affordances illustrating the interactions, artefacts and expectations that shape the community. This approach views community relationships as being based upon relationships that are linked to pre-existent contexts. Studies that share this perspective are predominantly education focused. However, other works, such as Mitra (1999), explores the characteristics of web text to develop interpretations of the people who write and read that text. Mitra (1999) calls for a rethinking of the notion of online community in which networks of texts signify meaning to a community while also becoming signifiers for the community itself. Studies such as Mitra’s (1999) that emphasise cultural practice rather than social structures draw upon the theoretical foundations Althusser, Gramsci and, particularly for Mitra (1999), Foucault.

Digital technology does not alter the variability of use, form or purpose of artefacts within a social network. Instead it is the lack of precision that exists between humans and artefacts, their use, exchange and degradation that ensures that any meanings produced or reproduced are necessarily fluid. The human ability to alter and repurpose artefacts to suit immediate and shifting needs prevents any innate definitional quality of a technology to remain singularly fixed. Artefacts resist any stability of meaning by being continuously disassembled and reassembled into newly meaningful assemblages. Our world is constructed by the human ability to alter and repurpose the meaning and understanding of ‘things’ in all situations. We exist in an indeterminate fluid sociality where objects, feelings, memories, meanings and understandings influence and are influenced by our actions and interactions.

Tyler (2002) and Tomas (1991) promote the potential of the Internet, and particularly the Web, as a ‘social laboratory’ that offers the means to rapidly and continuously identify the activities and interest of contemporary ‘everyday life’. This contrasts with positions that argue for the significance of the Internet in distinction and as a distinct ‘social’ space (Stone 1991; Stallabrass 2003, Liff, Steward & Watts 2002). As a response to this line of presentation, this paper is not ‘another’ paper about the
Internet or the Web or about social networking or MMORPGs in the narrow sense of discussing a website that self-defines itself as a social network or a MMORPG.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper we present an empirically grounded and inter-disciplinary study enabling a theoretical exploration of the deeper issues and implications that social networking has for organisational business models. Y!PP is the platform from which we have explored a rich environment that facilitates a complex series of socialities. We have shown that by drawing upon existing sociological theories such as situationism reveals the significance of existing continuous practices of daily routine and everyday life within the framework of socially networking. We have drawn upon YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates (Y!PP) for its unusual combination of gaming and social networking that are richer than the sum of each component system requiring mutual dependence between gameplay and social networking – creating a system. We have shown how the most mundane activity of Y!PP is, perhaps ironically given the theme of the game, sword-fighting is the actually one of the game’s key elements of social glue - a core activity that binds together much of the sociality of the environment. However, good sword-fighting skills are important in the game, as players are rated on their abilities therefore determining which pirate crews they will be considered to join. Another example drawn upon in relation to the significance of the mundane is the purchasing of clothing items. Clothing such as boots and hats can be expensive and require the owner to have large amounts of disposable income. This study’s examination of the culture of Y!PP illustrates the significance of artefacts within everyday life. The study has shown how exploring the mundane can provide valuable insight into the relationship between people, artefacts and organisations. The examination of role-playing games enables a renewed exploration of the reasons why and how organisations form. As with business organisations, groups of players must come together and support one another to benefit from the gathering, accumulation and distribution of artefacts. These networking activities include the imperfect renderings of meaning that assist in reinforcing existing hegemonic power relations and the shaping of social and organisational practices.

6 REFERENCES


