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Transformation of Social Tension Through Reality Quests

Abstract

Reality quests are becoming very popular, especially among young people, who want to get freedom, leadership and independence. Hence this phenomenon should be studied from sociological and psychological point of view. Under constant stress it is necessary to examine the ability to transform it into constructive, socially approved channels. Quests can help people fulfill their desire to be free and independent. When people participate in such social practices, they socialize and become more stable when faced with stress. In the paper the authors tried to prove the positive impact of quests on people, i.e. adaptation to modern way of life, a sort of training to prepare for stressful situations. We consider the quests, taking into account their importance in everyday life, influence on the processes of socialization and adaptation at different levels: individual, group, and society.

Keywords: adaptation, game practice, quests, social stress, tension.

JEL CODE: I12.

Transformacja napięcia społecznego poprzez realistyczne questy

Abstrakt

Realistyczne questy stają się bardzo popularne, szczególnie wśród młodych ludzi, którzy chcą uzyskać wolność, przywództwo i niezależność. Zjawisko to należy badać z socjologicznego i psychologicznego punktu widzenia. W warunkach ciągłego stresu należy zbadać zdolność do przekształcenia go w konstruktywne, społecznie akceptowane kanały. Questy mogą pomóc ludziom zrealizować ich pragnienie bycia wolnym i niezależnym. Kiedy ludzie uczestniczą w takich praktykach społecznych, stają się bardziej stabilni w obliczu stresu. W artykule autorzy starali się udowodnić pozytywny wpływ questów na ludzi, czyli adaptację do współczesnego stylu życia, rodzaj treningu przygotowującego do stresujących sytuacji. Rozważano questy biorąc pod uwagę ich znaczenie w życiu codziennym, wpływ na procesy socjalizacji i adaptacji na różnych poziomach: indywidualnym, grupowym i społecznym.

Słowa kluczowe: adaptacja, praktyka gier, questy, napięcie społeczne, napięcie.

Introduction

Nowadays quests become attractive for different groups of people such as the young, and elderly, friends seeking some kind of leisure, and whole families spending time together. The term “quest” is of English origin that means “searching”, “mystery game”, and it represents various types of on-line and off-line games in a virtual or real world. According to S. Nicholson, quests are live-action team-based games where players discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in order to accomplish a specific goal in a limited amount of time (Nicholson 2015, p. 1). They are a new social communication practice and a new kind of outdoor activities for people. Playing them, the participants should communicate and act together.

In ancient Greek mythology and literature, the concept of quest originally meant a way of constructing the plot, i.e. the characters travelled to a certain destination, and they had to overcome various obstacles (a good example is “The myth of Perseus”, or “The Labors of Hercules”). The quest is a game in which a player needs to solve problems. The plot can be predefined, and the outcome can be different. It depends on the player's actions (Alekseeva, Ryabov 2015, p. 15).

People have modernized quests significantly. In the 20th century the authors of Fantasy genre used quests in their stories (the best sellers by John. RR Tolkien "The Hobbit" and "Lord of the Rings"). In the 1970s computer game programmers borrowed this term. They used it for their computer games, the purpose of which was to move in the game world and get an ultimate destination. The player could have achieve this destination only if he/she overcame obstacles, solved problems, found and used various items, interacted with other characters. In the mid-1990s, the term "quest" got a new meaning. Educational web-quests appeared because of the Internet and the experience in the development of computer games. American educators B. Dodge and T. March are considered to be their creators. That should be the topic for another research.

The current study reveals a relatively new social practice that is gaining popularity in many Russian cities as well as in other countries. We demonstrate the role of games penetrating from the virtual world (computer games) into the real world (reality quests, quest rooms, city quests). Concerning their goals and action, all these social games are very similar, but the location where the action takes place is different. For example, escape rooms are held in a

prepared room which should be explored to find the clues, solve puzzles, which lead to their escape. Reality quests and City quests can be deployed in larger open areas.

Theoretical part

Although quests take place in different locations, they require teamwork, communication, and delegation as well as critical thinking, attention to detail, and lateral thinking. They are accessible to a wide age range of players and do not favor any gender; in fact, the most successful teams are those that are made up of players with a variety of experiences, skills, background knowledge, and physical abilities. As they are live-action games taking place in the physical world, they create opportunities for players to engage directly with each other in the same way that tabletop games do; players are eager to look at something newer than a glowing screen, and they flock to games in the physical world for face-to-face engagement opportunities (Nicholson 2015, p. 2).

The most popular quests are those that involve finding a way out of the room. The room can be designed as a "prison", "mental hospital", "bank safe", etc. As a rule, most of the quests require pretending doing illegal things (escape from the prison or psychiatric hospital, a bank robbery and so on), or showing the events that threaten the game participant's life. The question we asked during our research: Why are people attracted to such devotions during a game? What caused such a rapid spread of this social practice? In our opinion, one of the reasons for such behavior is social pressure or stress that most people experience in the 21st century. Sociologists and psychologists and even physiologists define stress, known as social stress, as a special condition of the human body exposed to a variety of factors (stressors) increasing requirements and complicating conditions of its adaptation. H. Selye calls this "non-specific response syndrome or general adaptation syndrome to stressors in attempt of human body to maintain a state of physiological balance or "homeostasis" (Selye 1975, p. 90). Social stress includes different kinds of social tension, pressure, extreme situations, stress, requiring multiple adaptive reactions, balancing complex social behavior, interaction systems.

Many factors can cause social stress. It depends on the complexity of the political, economic and cultural situation in the modern society, speed and frequency of social and cultural changes. Information flow also influences our feelings at work and at home. In the post-industrial society people learn how to work and live in the conditions of constant multitasking. As many psychologists note, the human body is unable to adapt to the

physiological features of the instantly changing challenges of the time. For example, the researchers of Stanford University prove by hypothesis that those who are accustomed to concentrate on several tasks at once, can remember less information, have difficulty in organizing thoughts and are not able to filter out irrelevant information and, as a result, are experiencing stress. Environmental catastrophes and adverse events, cases of extremism and terrorism can have stressful effect on human as well. We can have stress even if we do not do anything. "The real problem of boredom appeared as the lack of meaningful, professionally relevant work to do" (Bartone 1998, p. 598). In such conditions the human activity and complex forms of social adaptation are maintained by resistance mechanisms fighting the pressure of environment.

"Any type of mental pressure can bring on stress. It is not a sign of weakness and things do not have to be extremely bad in your life, it is simply a result of any type of mental strain that you are unable to cope with. Everyday issues that many of us will experience can result in stress. Money or job worries, assignment deadlines, family problems, issues in your living situation, or even just the pressure of balancing classes with other commitments can be those factors. It can be one event, a build-up of events or a mixture of both where something tips you over the edge" (Treacy 2015, p. 9). Thus, the topic we are dealing with, should be investigated from different points of view, and we have to examine not only the adaptation peculiarities, but also the ability to transform stress into constructive, socially approved channels in the conditions of constant stress.

Materials and methods

A set of complementary methods are used in this study: theoretical analysis, document analysis, secondary data analysis, semi-formalized interviews of focus groups. Game practices have been very popular since ancient times. They have always served as constructive expression of aggression. Players have always been engaged in playing video or computer games. The scientists proved that more engagement leads to a greater impact on game-playing. The combined effect of a tendency to become deeply engaged in game-playing with higher scores on trait aggression could be a potent risk factor for negative impact from playing violent games (Brockmyer 2009, p. 629). There are a lot of quests connected with violence and aggression nowadays, too. A good example is a new but widespread social practice called "Room of Fury". The consumers of this service are people of different social levels and financial situation, feeling stressed at home and at work. The main point of this

service is the possibility to smash old furniture and domestic appliances. In such rooms you can have different instruments (a hammer, a sledgehammer, a bat, a stick and so on) to destroy the things in the room, also you can throw, tear, kick them. Your favorite music can be played during this event. Some people say that such a practice helps them to chill out and feel better. But psychologists and psychotherapists argue with this statement as, according to their words, such activity can have a negative effect, or even can be dangerous for those who are mentally unstable. They may want to repeat the experience outside a specially equipped room. In addition, this behavior only spins aggression and aggravates tension. Although other scientists do not agree here claiming that such practice helps to get rid of negative energy. This phenomenon should be investigated thoroughly. We will deal with this problem in the next study.

Now we want to understand the nature of the game and the reasons for its popularity. Data analysis and interviews helped us to do this. As we have found out, quests give people an opportunity to “accelerate and compress time”, to make decisions fast, to act in the conditions of uncertainty. The ability to act quickly allows the participants to get a new experience in a relatively short time, to experience a lot of new feelings, to solve problems, but what is most important is to achieve the goal. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the action, which is built around the concept of habitus, shows that social agents develop strategies which are adapted to the needs of the social world that they inhabit. “These strategies are unconscious and act on the level of a body logic. Thus, individuals learn to want what conditions make possible for them, and not to aspire to what is not available to them” (Bourdieu 1998, p. 15). Social practices are appealing to people as they can be understood and observed by them when they create situations of organized activities and manage them to find the sense of their own behavior. They try to explain these situations through their own behavior.

The analysis of the literature allows us to claim that quests are not very popular in comparison with other forms of leisure. In the paper “Reasons of popularity of quests as a form of leisure for Russian people” Chistyakova shows the results of a survey among people of different ages in one of Russian cities. According to the survey, 36% of the respondents believe that quests are less popular than other forms of entertainment due to the lack of information about them in the mass media. When asked, the quest participants said that they’d learnt about the game from their friends. A high price and intellectual orientation make reality quests interesting only for a few people (Chistyakova 2013, p. 12). Every sixth respondent (17%) points out the possibility to develop logic, attention and intellect as the most attractive

side of such form of entertainment. Almost half of the respondents (45%) choose quests just to rest after everyday life problems, and 32% consider quests to be a kind of brain training after boring work. The results of this survey define a social portrait of a quest player. It is an average person involved into routine, boring, non-intellectual work. One of the questions of this survey asked whether quests were dangerous or not. The majority of the respondents don't think they are dangerous and every fifth says that the outcome depends on the reasonableness of the quests and the participants' prudence.

During the in-depth semi-formalized interview the respondents noted what was the most difficult and unpleasant for them in quest they took part in, what they liked and remembered about them, what experience they got. The analysis of the data showed that the majority of the quests participants are young people living in big cities. They participate in quests as it is not only interesting and exciting, but also useful. In quests people act mainly in small groups, although sometimes the number of players can reach 50 or more. They see the positive impact of quests on their life, i.e. adaptation to the modern way of life, a sort of training to be ready for stressful situations: "Taking into consideration the speed of modern life, quests don't allow to relax, on the contrary, they train fast decision-making. We have to build a route and think over the sequence of tasks". The main difficulties the participants face in quests are connected with problem solving and doing practical tasks. One of the respondents noted, "The most difficult task was to find the destination in the suburb, although we had a smart phone, a tablet to access the Internet and the map". Another person noted that "some tasks were too difficult to accomplish, but we understood that we didn't have the right to make a mistake. In one task we had to pour water from one container to another just to get the code and the key. We couldn't do it alone and the organizers stepped in to help us, but we had lost time". "The worst thing is when other teams can lodge an appeal and argue the results of the competition. Because of this our team moved from the 9th place to the 10th. We were sorry." Despite the failures in completing assignments, practically everybody, who'd participated in quests, had a positive impression of such games. Negative moments are compensated by the feeling of competition and game.

We would like to note that all the participants believe in cognitive opportunities and vivid emotional impressions of quests. As the most useful thing the participants name a new social experience and opportunity to interact in the group. After the quest "Saw" people said that they did things together, "they were excited by the atmosphere of unexpectedness. That was unusual but pleasant experience. I wouldn't go to this quest once again, but I would try some

other ones". The analysis of the survey shows that all the participants want to take part in quests again. Their emotions and impressions are expressed as follows: "A good leisure for those who like something new, but do not like going somewhere too far. This is a test for your brain and body"; "It is very interesting and unusual – it seems you were inside a computer game. You feel so excited and happy when you find the next clue. You forget about the reality, your work, and problems. The only thing you remember is the necessity to find the way out. And you understand there is always a way out".

The results of the conducted interviews show that social practices have not only entertaining but also educational function. As a girl, who participated in several quests (Saw, Fear Maze, Night Watch) and organized quests for teens in the camp, said, team games have a strong impact on teenagers, they train their skills of interaction in difficult situations, help deal with a number of psychological problems (fear, shyness, etc.) Many players say that difficult tasks allow them to forget their fear and mobilize their strength. Plunging into the game world, "feeling like being in the computer game or a film", the participants realize their peculiarities and build new relations with others. So quests can be considered to be an instrument of self-knowledge. Modelling special situations creates conditions for living and understanding a new experience. "Another quest is going to be opened soon. I'm eager to take part in it."

It should be noted that over the centuries the function of spiritual guidance and psychological assistance has been performed exclusively by church - after regular confession and absolution a person usually felt better. However, the majority of young people in the 21st century do not come to church and religion, they replace their need in psychological compensation with other practices. Removing social tension is necessary to avoid psychological disorders and depression, the formation of stable fears of neuroses. In our opinion, the new gaming practices are the key to a correct perception of external stimuli and internal sensations. These are the game situations that allow us to form another method of reaction - our thoughts, feelings and emotions are not forced out in an unpleasant physical way. The theoretical and empirical analysis shows that the practice of gaming quests are popular primarily among young people, because at that age the value system is characterized by a desire for freedom, independence, independent decision-making. It is at this stage of the socialization when these priorities are manifested most clearly.

Quests can take many forms, they can be classified on various grounds: according to the degree of reality, we can speak about real and virtual quests; according to the time, we can

distinguish day and night quests. Quests can be short-term (less than an hour), middle (one day), long-term (from several days to a week). According to the level, quests can be divided into elementary (for beginners), intermediate, and advanced. According to the age of participants, and the story, they are intended for teenagers or young and middle-aged people, but they can also be universal (for all ages and backgrounds). During the study we looked into the meaning of reality quests at three levels: at a person level, a group level, a society level. An individual widens an existing social experience and acquires a new one. As a rule, the participants don't want to take part in the same game. They meet their need to experience a particular situation and want to experience something new.

Reality quests can be seen as mini-social scene with limited area, time, social norms, rules and terms. The roles of people are expanded, and according to J. Mid and his theory of role personality, the participants learn new social roles by changing their behavior and acquiring new skills and competences. At the personal level we watch people overcoming their phobias, experiencing personal interrelation in extreme situations and self-correcting their psycho-emotional state. At the group level, teams are built, socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy are formed, group decision-making is learnt. The experience of each participant is combined and transformed into new practices. Living the same situation, which demands quick response and decision making, allows all to learn new competences, including emotions and feelings like self-confidence and happiness, expressing them openly without any fear. One more important impact of quests at group-level is the effect of synergy, appearing during team work, which gives a better result than any individual work. At the society level such social practices indicate institutional changes in a society and formation of new social needs. To meet them the society executes new institutional practices. Consequently, it can lead to a new social institution formation as the failure of traditional elements of social practice and lack of social experience are shown. Quests allow the participants to acquire necessary competences and skills during this leisure activity.

Quests carry out different functions – from entertaining to communicative and even educational. In our opinion the resources of these practices are not fully used yet. Taking into consideration their socio-pedagogical and socio-psychological technology, reality quests can be widely used in education and in medicine (various remedial courses).

Research results

Reality quests are becoming habitual and popular, especially among young people. Such activities affect our daily life, they change the social institutions and social structure of our society. In the conditions of constant stress the possibilities of adaptation are exhausted, and as a consequence new practices of fighting stress are formed. Therefore, further interdisciplinary research of this phenomenon is required in psychological, physical and social context.

The main objective of the stress is to mobilize a living creature so that it is “fully prepared” to meet the enemy, in other words, life's difficulties. A human is a biosocial creature, the nature provided us with mechanisms of biological protection and reaction systems of our body to survive in biological world, but it is not suitable for social life with its rules and established order. Stress and its influence on cognitive performance and psychological health has become a central issue in the last decades. “Acute and chronic stress is associated with a range of cognitive disabilities and mental as well as somatoform disorders” (Piefke 2017, p. 346). The terms of "social community" made a serious adjustment in the streamlined nature of the response diagram to the stress factor. That's why, the protection against social stress should be new social technologies, new practices, such as quests, for example. We can not avoid stress, but we must learn how to regulate our behavior under stress, guide and use the adaptive energy in the socially approved activity.

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, social environment is the main reason for stress and pressure. Therefore, in many cases it is appropriate not to avoid stress, but to find social mechanisms of its regulation and usage for the good. “A feeling of psychological well-being consists of many components; they include learning conditions, relationships in a team, a personal status, a financial situation, confidence in the future, positive motivation for future careers” (Serdiuk 2016, p. 219).

The present research explored social practices as the main forms of social pressure transformation. We determined the value of quests at different levels: individual, group and society; identified the influence of quests on the process of socialization and adaptation of an individual in the conditions of social stress and looked into socio-psychological features of quest participants.

In quests we could see combination of two types of environment – virtual environment turns into real one. For example, quests with the scenes of science fiction help people adapt to the future.

Thus, the importance of quests for the society is great, the energy that appears while overcoming the stress can be transformed and used for socially constructive purposes. According to this, the reality quests can be used as a social technology.

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