

Building Social Relationships in a Virtual Community of Gamers

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INTRODUCTION

The explosive growth of the Internet has enabled virtual communities to engage in social activities such as meeting people, developing friendships and relationships, sharing experiences, telling personal stories, or just listening to jokes. Such online activities are developed across time and space with people from different walks of life, age groups, and cultural backgrounds. A few scholars have clearly defined virtual community as a social entity where people relate to one another by the use of a specific technology (Jones, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Schuler, 1996) like computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies to foster social relationships (Wood & Smith, 2001). It is further supported by Stolterman, Agren, and Croon (1999) who refers to virtual community as a new social “life form” surfacing from the Internet and CMC. There are several types of virtual community such as the virtual community of relationship, the virtual community of place, the virtual community of memory, the virtual community of fantasy, the virtual community of mind/interest, and the virtual community of transaction (Bellah, 1985; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Kowch & Schwier, 1997). These types of virtual community all share a common concept, which is the existence of a group of people who are facilitated with various forms of CMCs. With the heightened use of CMCs, people begin to transit and replicate the same sense of belonging through meaningful relationships by creating a new form of social identity and social presence. As emphasized by Hiltz and Wellman (1997), people can come from many parts of the world to form “close-knit” relationships in a virtual community.

The purpose of this article is to understand how online gamers as a virtual community build social relationships through their participation in online games. Empirically, several aspects in the context of virtual community are still not fully understood, such as: (1) What types of rules, norms, and values are grounded in virtual community? (2) How do people institutionalize

their members in a virtual community? and (3) Why do they create social relationships in virtual environment? The identified gap thus explains why studies have produced inconsistent findings on the impacts of online game play (Williams, 2003), in which many studies in the past have only looked at aggression and addiction. A more detailed understanding of the social context of in-game interactions would help to improve our understanding of the impact of online games on players and vice versa. Therefore, this article will present a case study of a renowned online game, Ever Quest (EQ), with the aim of understanding how players establish and develop social relationships. In specific, the Institutional Theory was applied to examine the social relationships among the players, and a hermeneutic-interpretive method was used to analyze the data in order to address the following general research question, “How is the social world of EQ constituted in terms of building social relationships?”

BACKGROUND OF EVERQUEST

The virtual community of gamers’ environment investigated in this study is Ever Quest (EQ). EQ is the world’s largest premier three-dimensional (3D) “massively-multiplayer online role-playing game” more commonly referred to as MMORPG. People are becoming more attracted to this new type of online game, which is a subset of a massively-multiplayer online game (MMOG) that enables hundreds or thousands of players to simultaneously interact in a game world where they are connected via the Internet. Players interact with each other through avatars, that is, graphical representations of the characters that they play. The popularity of MMORPGs have become evident with the introduction of the broadband Internet. MMORPGs “trace their roots to non-graphical online multiuser dungeon (MUD) games, to text-based computer games such as *Adventure* and *Zork*, and to pen and paper role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*” (Wikipedia, 2004,

para. 2). It is expected that online gaming will grow from a \$127 million industry in 2003 to a \$6 billion industry by the year 2006 (ScreenDigest, 2002).

EQ is a game that attracts an estimated 400,000 players online each day from around the globe and, at peak times, more than 100,000 players will be playing EQ simultaneously (Micheals, 2004). The game's players interact with each other inside and outside the game for game playing, game-related and non-game-related interactions, and for buying and selling game-related goods. EQ, as a game, is characterized by well-defined social structures, roles, interaction rules, and power relations. EQ, as a virtual community, encompasses all of the different kinds of virtual community. EQ is a virtual community of relationship, a virtual community of place, a virtual community of memory, a virtual community of fantasy, a virtual community of mind/interest, and a virtual community of transaction.

After its launch in 1999, EQ became a worldwide leader in massively-multiplayer online games, and it is North America's biggest massively-multiplayer online game (Micheals, 2004). Since then, EQ and its expansions¹ have sold over 2.5 million copies worldwide, and it has been translated into seven languages. EQ is one of the largest and most dynamic online fantasy worlds ever created (Stratics, 2004). The reason for choosing to study EQ is because of the incredible popularity of online gaming, which has numerous economic and societal implications.

CASE STUDY OF EVERQUEST ONLINE GAMING

The method used was a single case study to examine the unique social world of EQ. There were, altogether, 157 respondents chosen from the game, discussion forums, and Web sites. They were invited through emails to participate in the study. The case study took six months to complete. Within this approach, multiple modes of data collection were utilized, including online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, interactions through discussion forums, analysis of documentation such as game manuals, monitoring of Web sites, and non-reactive observations/recordings of chat sessions in the game. It is useful to note that the interview protocols for the semi-structured interviews, online chats, and online questionnaire were all the same. The only

difference was how it was carried out—through face-to-face interviews or through the use of information communication technologies (ICTs).

The respondents were interviewed using an established semi-structured protocol. The interview protocol began with some general questions. First, information elicited from each respondent was on how they got to know about EQ. Answers included: through friends, magazine article or gaming press, word of mouth, co-worker, came with computer, family members, store display, online Web site or from Internet, and so forth. Second, further probing questioning was carried out, for example, how long have they played the game? Most of the respondents have played EQ from 1 – 6 years. Third, they were asked what attracted them to playing EQ. The answers were classified into four thematic categories: (1) the social aspects of the game; (2) the game play; (3) the characteristics of the game; and (4) generalized recreation. After asking about the general questions, the main issues on social relationships were raised for them to answer. Once saturation was reached in the answers given by the respondents, the interview efforts were halted, and the answers (in text) obtained from the interviews and online questionnaire were analyzed.

BUILDING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF EQ

In essence, many of the respondents described the social aspects of the game, such as friendships, interaction rules, socialization, leadership skills, relationships, sense of belonging to a community, teamwork, and the different cultures. Below are examples quoted from two respondents:

Friends first and foremost. When I first arrived in (the) game, I was completely amazed at how far gaming has progressed, and continue to be amazed even still. I am a gamer to the core, playing on every platform since Atari.

I enjoy the interaction with my fellow players. I have long been a role player (pen and paper style), and EQ allows me to enjoy that same kind of group camaraderie and fun at my computer. I also am a big fan of the high fantasy genre of games.

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