

Understanding the Virtual Community of Gamers'

Shafiz Affendi Mohd Yusof

Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Virtual community can be defined as “a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 1). With the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies such as listservs, bulletin boards, discussion forums, and chat rooms, the time zone differences become less critical and geographical distance and limitations diminish.

A virtual community is primarily a social entity where people relate to one another by the use of a specific technology (Jones, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Schuler, 1996). As emphasized by Wood and Smith (2001), “people who use CMC technologies and people who study them are increasingly aware that the Internet is fostering relationships not just between two individuals but among many, many more people” (p. 109). People can also form a “close-knit” relationship (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997), though they are relatively more disperse as people can come from any parts of the world. The closeness or proximity in virtual community is a result of the social interactions that occur between the members. It is further suggested that the members of a virtual community are more heterogeneous in their characteristics and homogeneous in their attitudes (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). Stolterman, Agren, and Croon (1999) refers to virtual community as a new social “life form” surfacing from the Internet and CMC in which individuals and groups seek social support (Walther & Boyd, 1997).

This article aims to present the social world of virtual gamers in EverQuest (EQ) using “institutional” theoretical perspective. First, this article begins with an overview of the phenomenon of virtual communities. Then, I will describe the background of online gamers by offering the historical-social analysis of EQ and the studies that have examined EQ as a context. Additionally, I will define the concept of community and

virtual community and then present the several types of virtual communities. The subsequent section of this article consists of a discussion from the perspectives of “new institutional theory” as the main theoretical lens in this type of study. Last, I will present a brief overview of potential future work on virtual community in general and online gamers in specific, and finally conclude the chapter.

EVERQUEST AS A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

The virtual community of gamers environment to be looked at is EQ. EQ is the world’s largest premier three-dimensional (3D) massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). It 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. The game’s players interact with each other inside and outside the game for game playing, game-related, and nongame-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, a virtual community of memory, and a virtual community of transaction.

The social world of EQ does not only comprise hundreds of thousands of people playing the game but it also consists of people who are participating in social activities outside the game. It is also a busy crowded world. These people are players of the game, and they interact between each other inside and outside the game for casual interactions. This has led to the spawning of online and outside of game social activity that is

conducted through official and unofficial Web sites which serve as markets where goods and money are exchange, where guilds are formed, and where informal social interactions take place. This is also where players seek information about the game in terms of latest news, updates, tactics, shortcuts, and strategies.

EQ is a worldwide leader in massively multiplayer online games, and it is North America's biggest massively multiplayer online game. Since its launch in 1999, EQ and its expansions¹ have sold over 2.5 million copies worldwide. It continues to be one of the gaming industry's biggest and most influential titles (Radd, 2004), and it has been translated into seven languages. EQ is one of the largest and most dynamic online fantasy worlds ever created (Stratics, 2004). I chose to study EQ because of the incredible popularity of online gaming, which has numerous economic and societal implications.

Verant Interactive, an independent online gaming development studio that emerged from 989 Studios (formerly Sony Interactive Studios), began developing EQ in 1996. It debuted on March 16, 1999 by Sony Online Entertainment and has received numerous awards since its debut from such organizations as Entertainment Weekly (Top Ten Hall of Fame), Electric Games (1999 Online Game of the Year), Computer Games Online (Best Online Game of 1999), and Gamespot (Game of the Year for 1999). EQ allows players to create their own specialized characters by selecting from multiple races, classes, skills, physical appearances, and names. With seven enormous continents and hundreds of death-defying zones to discover, the fantasy world of Norrath allows players to embark on exciting journeys.

Not only is the social world² of EQ comprised of the hundreds of thousands of people playing the game, but it also consists of people who participate in social activities outside the game. Game players interact with each other inside the game as they play the game, and they interact outside the game in numerous in-game and out-of-game social activities conducted through official³ and unofficial⁴ Web sites. These Web sites serve a number of functions in the social world of EQ. They are markets where goods are bought and sold, where guilds are formed, and where informal social interactions take place. These sites are also resources where players seek information about the game in terms of the latest news, updates, tactics, shortcuts, and strategies.

RESEARCH IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Over the past years, research in the virtual community has grown and intensified. Moreover, with the expansion of CMC, these technologies provide a platform and new ways for global society to meet, communicate, collaborate, socialize, and shop (Burnett, 2000; Turoff, 1991). Much of these works involve case studies, ethnographic studies, or personal interviews with community participants where researcher's content analyzed textual documents from the context.

For example, an interesting case study conducted by Radin (2001) looked at the issue of social capital and transformations of trust on a breast cancer Web site. Radin found that there was a three-stage process in which (1) newcomers "lurk" in an environment that is rich with breast cancer information and observed the community at their leisure; (2) participants are offered several ways to share personal disclosures, thus building mutual trust; and (3) a variety of shared activities, both virtual and face-to-face helped to build trust. This study showed that these three stages are sequential in helping some participants increase their trust levels. Furthermore, Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002) conducted a study using the philosophical inquiry method to describe the role of computer networking in fostering electronic determinants of trust and its use in virtual communities. His study emphasized that trust has two dimensions, not three as had been found in some other settings. Trust was composed of trust in abilities and trust in integrity. These two studies seem to be important because institutional change and transformation rely on social movement and coalition building, which rely on the interface of trust for those pushing for change.

Other studies such as Wall (1999) conducted a comparative case study to understand how sense of community is created, perceived, and maintained by the membership of several synchronous online communities. Rosenblum (1998) carried out an ethnomethodology study to describe the ways four couples maintained their relationships primarily through online communication in synchronous Internet environments. By understanding the concept of sense of community and its impact on the relationship of online community members, the study provides insights on the underlying mechanisms that are involved in developing, stabilizing, and changing institutions.

Furthermore, there are several other studies such as from Wick (1997) who examined the discourse of

6 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/understanding-virtual-community-gamers/17812

Related Content

The Access Rainbow: Conceptualizing Universal Access to the Information/Communications Infrastructure

Andrew Clement and Leslie R. Shade (2000). *Community Informatics: Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technologies* (pp. 32-51).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/access-rainbow-conceptualizing-universal-access/6703

Why Virtual Worlds Matter

Angela Adrian (2010). *Law and Order in Virtual Worlds: Exploring Avatars, Their Ownership and Rights* (pp. 198-202).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/virtual-worlds-matter/43120

The Effect of Augmented and Virtual Reality Interfaces in the Creative Design Process

Tilanka Chandrasekera and So-Yeon Yoon (2018). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-13).

www.irma-international.org/article/the-effect-of-augmented-and-virtual-reality-interfaces-in-the-creative-design-process/203064

Exploring Virtual Reality for the Assessment and Rehabilitation of Executive Functions

Elisa Pedrolì, Silvia Serino, Federica Pallavicini, Pietro Cipresso and Giuseppe Riva (2018). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 32-47).

www.irma-international.org/article/exploring-virtual-reality-for-the-assessment-and-rehabilitation-of-executive-functions/203066

The Effect of Augmented and Virtual Reality Interfaces in the Creative Design Process

Tilanka Chandrasekera and So-Yeon Yoon (2018). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-13).

www.irma-international.org/article/the-effect-of-augmented-and-virtual-reality-interfaces-in-the-creative-design-process/203064