

Chapter 30

The Virtual Social Continuum Expressed Interaction and Community Formation in MMORPGs

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ABSTRACT

From the interactive textual worlds of MUDs and MuSHes to the visually rich, textured three-dimensional realms of MMORPGs, participants move from loose to strong associations forming social networks via structured guidelines and interaction patterns. These virtual world inhabitants create communication conduits, collaborate to attain goals and solve problems, or entertain themselves. In this chapter, the author uses Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft, one of the most successful MMORPGs to date, to chart the various associations ranging from casual conversations to groups and guilds in which role specialization is critical to close-knit community success. The author argues that using rewards for accepted behavior creates a socialization continuum that stimulates players to interact with one another.

INTRODUCTION

From the interactive textual worlds of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and Multi-User Shared Hallucinations (MuSHes) to the visually rich, textured three-dimensional realms of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMORPGs), participants move from loose to strong associations forming social networks via structured guidelines and interaction patterns. These virtual world inhabitants create communication conduits, collaborate to attain

goals and solve problems, or simply have fun.

After tracing the history of MMORPG development and ludological research, the author examines the various interaction techniques (e.g., passerby buffs) and tools (questing parties, crafting exchanges, etc.) players use to create their social networks within virtual worlds. The study demonstrates the importance of a socialization continuum to a virtual world's success: the more each player practices accepted behavior and displays valued traits, the stronger the virtual community becomes.

The author finds that the level of interaction and benefits gleaned from community formation equal

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the expected levels of networking and interactions. In other words, the more impetus for collaboration and community, the more virtual world participants desire to form intricate social networks, thereby gleaning more benefits from the virtual world itself. Ultimately, the author argues that the combination of social interaction, collaborative tasks, shared resource tools, and reputation building create one of the most compelling media for entertainment and for collaborative work within the ever increasing virtual shared spaces of our digital world.

BACKGROUND MMORPG Roots

Researchers date video games from the advent of Russell's *Spacewar* in 1961 (Kent, 2001, p. 19) and the first commercial arcade hit, *Computer Space* in 1971 (Kent, 2001, p. 33), a remake of the original *Spacewar*. Analyses focus on the development of arcade and console markets into the early 2000s (Kent, 2001) because video games were traditionally played on screens, e.g., television (Baer, 2001). However, interactive text adventures designed for computers, such as *Colossal Cave Adventure*, inspired pioneers (Hafner & Lyon, 1996, pp. 207-208) to develop *Adventure* (Robinett, 2008) for the Atari 2600. It was one of the most popular titles for the console system even though it was among the first.

Most of the original interactive text games are from the Role Playing Games (RPG) genre, which contains the Dungeon and Dragon (D&D) sub-genre beginning with the tabletop RPG in 1974 (Birnbaum, 2004). Players take on the role of an adventurer (warrior, wizard, thief, etc.) embarking on never-ending quests to slay dragons, help others, and gain experience. The most successful RPGs today, such as *Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008), use this approach.

Except for tabletop D&D games, players did not interact in early RPGs. Even in the interactive

Colossal Cave Adventure, the player explored the game alone. However, in the 1970s programmers created multi-player computer games incorporating human interaction. In 1978, Roy Tribshaw created the first Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) (Antell, 1991). Eventually it became popular among CompuServe users under the title, *British Legends* (Toth, 2005). Its players were able to compete in battles and perform quests. MUDs appeared on computer networks and though the content varied from science fiction to war to simple adventure, many shared a common feature: online communication tools, such as "bulletin boards, [e]mail, [and] chat" (Antell, 1991).

MUDs evolved through many permutations, but select events increased MUD popularity. In 1989, Jim Aspnes released TinyMUD which focused on collaborative problem solving and user teams rather than combat and adventure (Bartle, 2008). Moreover TinyMUD ran on UNIX systems, so more people had access. TinyMUD diversified MUDs and more acronyms appeared. MuSHes began to connate MUDs with a strong social and collaborative focus. From these grew the academic MOO (MUD Object-Oriented) now used for collaborative instruction (Holmevik & Haynes, 2000).

Eventually the graphics of the video game combined with the RPG questing of MUDs and the social nature of MuSHes. In 1991 America Online (AOL) released the first MMORPG. In *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare, 2008), AOL subscribers could form groups, talk via textual chat boxes, and share various adventures in real-time. With the growth of the Internet in the mid 1990s, the user base of MMORPGs and MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games)—a game not focusing on RPG play—grew exponentially. By 1997 games such as *Ultima Online* (Electronic Arts, 2008b) had proven MMORPGs' popularity. Today's successful MMORPGs, such as *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony, 2008) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008a), assure that more MMORPGs will be on the way.

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