The Varying Structures and Social Influences of Online Gaming Communities

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ABSTRACT

There are many types of online gaming communities which often operate and are structured very different from real world groups. The purpose of this study is to investigate the interactions of online communities and how their structure and social interactions differ from real world groups and communities, as well as the relationships between their members through the use of different forms of communication media. The communities of interest focused on Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG), and investigated the stigma of online gaming being seen as anti-social, which has been found to be the opposite. The concept of Real Money Trade (RMT) in competitive games was also more prevalent than expected.

The structure and influence of online community interaction is an area that has been investigated partially, but changes in communication technology and trends require newer investigations and information. As technology continues to advance, simple groups (Nardi and Harris 2006) and people constantly adapt to these changes in communication which create social environments structured much different and more advanced than before (Fernback 2007). These social groups and communities can be very different from real world groups. Further research between the similarities and differences of online and offline groups is important.

The varying types of online communication platforms and technologies that are being used to communicate between individuals and groups also affect these social interactions. The individual users' experiences within different online gaming communities will also varies as each community has their own unique members and viewpoints which can change due to the factors of time, current video game and offline life, but each is involved in a highly social environment.

Communities

The use of the internet as a social platform is increasing as technology continues to advance. In this study I investigate the world of online groups which are referred to from this point as Virtual Communities (VC) also called "Guilds", most times with a focus on massive multi-player online games (MMOG). I find this field interesting partially due to being a participant in the field which will allow access to communities, but mainly because of the unique culture and experiences that others might not ever be able to recognize or become aware of. This study investigates different types of leadership structures, how technology can supplement this, community dynamics and which type of structure is perceived to be the most successful both in short and long term scenarios.

A social network is one part of a virtual community. A VC is a group of people with similar expectations, goals and interests in mind with a platform that can disregard great differences in physical location (Gunawardena, Hermands, Sanchez, Richmond, Bohley and Tuttle 2009). One universal necessity of VCs that affects the community heavily is its internal structure and use of administrative tools; whether both of these are strictly organized or not, they are always in place, especially in MMOG's (Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton 2001; Nardi and Harris 2006). These rules are often stated. They can even be as simple as "be nice and have fun" as well as include unwritten rules shared by members; however, it will always depend on the group. Some VCs can be very structured with a large chain of command while others can have a figure head leader with power deriving from a democratic system focused on the members. The internal structure is very reliant on the use of supplemental technology and members to maintain it in order to provide communication and interaction between the group and individual members (Wilson and Peterson 2002). Certain members in a group often invest their time and effort and, on occasion, money for administrative or leadership purposes to allow the group to continue to function properly (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler and Kraut 2007). These investigations lead to the following questions: what are the dynamics of Virtual Communities and how are they created? What variables and or methods allow a community to evolve and maintain itself over longer periods of time?

Influence of Online Communities

VCs can have enhancing effects for individuals in regards to social capital and a sense of belongingness but the opposite can also occur with excessive or improper exposure. In the context of this study social capital can be viewed as a member's community commitment. According to Wellman (2001) social capital is gained when people care greatly for their community, have a strong sense of belonging and willingness to work for their group. This sense of belonging can also be attributed to gratification of members when the group as a whole benefits (Butler, et al. 2007). These benefits within the setting of an MMOG, specifically focusing on the game Archeage include: completion of world content (within the game) that requires teamwork, coordination and skill between many members of a guild (VC), often while competing against another group. This content within the game setting can include but is not limited to: difficult and contested bosses, completion of dungeons, acquisition of property as well as control of resources for monetary gains. Completion of such tasks ranging from smaller groups of players (2-10) as well as for larger ones such as one or several guilds working together (10-200 players) can begin to form a sense of community and commitment. However Wellman (2001) observed that high use of the internet actually weakened a member's commitment to an online community.

The reason for a decrease in commitment arose from the unpleasant exposure to other members who are annoying or simply frustrating to interact with, which becomes more likely as the internet is used excessively and especially in larger groups. In smaller online groups, however, there are more opportunities to interact with members in a more personal manner to build social capital through the entirety of a community, instead of being one voice drowned in a sea of others (Nardi and Harris 2006; Fernback 2007). There are many different VCs involved in each MMOG which creates many questions of interest. How do different VCs interact with each other in competitive play and on a player to player and VC basis? What characteristics or actions influence how a player perceives another Virtual Community? By being able to interact with more than one group within a larger community (such as a MMOG) it would allow members to choose who they play and spend their time with, unlike real world interactions where it is not as easy. What has made an individual choose this group over others? Trust between members and control structure of a VC could influence this decision.

VCs are often very social environments with game mechanics and communication technology in place within and outside of their respective online game for members to communicate as a whole and to other individuals efficiently. This ease of access allows for the creation of social roles, social identity of members within a group as well as group norms and especially discourse (Souza and Preece 2004; Gunawardena, et al.

2009; Gleave, Welser, Lento and Smith 2009). These roles could also include in game strategies for a distribution of tasks, such as healers, defenders and attackers in order to play efficiently and accomplish goals. As stated earlier, groups often have shared goals, interests and expectations in mind; however, another aspect that is more relevant to the social environment is shared meanings and group culture.

 Shared meanings are terms and concepts understood by the group as a whole in relation to their field of focus, often of organic creation and sometimes without knowledge of the origin. One example of a shared meaning is the abbreviation "AFK" short for "away from keyboard". This shared meaning has its use within the game and other forms of communication platforms in order to notify fellow players of their activity status. Shared meanings within a community are often heavily influenced by the game the members are participating in. The words "Divine Ayanad Life Katana" most likely will not mean much to people who do not play the game Archeage. A "Divine Ayanad Life Katana" is the highest tier of weapon (Ayanad), Divine being the grade (7/10th highest in the game) which is rare to achieve and often costly. The Life portion is the specific version of the weapon (katana): each weapon at higher tiers has 7 possibilities with different stats on each, assigned randomly upon creation. The katana (weapon) is used primarily by melee characters that focus on strength stats in the game Archeage to maximize damage; however, the Life possibility of weapons grants only the spirit stat which is primarily used by healers, making the extra stats near useless for a melee character. There is a bit of irony involved in this as well as a Divine Ayanad Life Katana is a very strong weapon; however, the extra stats aside from damage have no use for the characters that would use a katana. Included below is a table showing the weapon grade upgrade chances referred to as regrading and potential for breaking items (Figure 1.1).

Archeage v2.9 Regrade Chance Table of Weapons, Armor & Accesories

Current Item Grade	Charm Used	Chances of Success From Scroll				Chances of Failure	
		Regrade Scroll +1 Grade	Resplendent Regrade Scroll +1 Grade	Resplendent Regrade Scroll +2 Grade	No change	Downgrade to Arcane	Item Destroyed
Basic	No Charm	100% to Grand	80% to Grand	20% to Rare	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Grand	No Charm	40% to Rare	32% to Rare	8% to Arcane	60.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Yellow	60% to Rare	48% to Rare	12% to Arcane	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Rare	No Charm	30% to Arcane	24% to Arcane	6% to Heroic	70.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Yellow	45% to Arcane	36% to Aracne	9% to Heroic	55.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Arcane	No Charm	30% to Heroic	24% to Heroic	6% to Unique	70.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Green	52.5% to Heroic	42% to Heroic	10.5% to Unique	47.50%	0.00%	0.00%
Heroic	No Charm	25% to Unique	20% to Unique	5% to Celestial	75.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Blue	43.75% to Unique	35% to Unique	8.75% Celestial	56.25%	0.00%	0.00%
Unique	No Charm	20% to Celestial	16% to Celestial	4% to Divine	80.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Yellow	30% to Celestial	24% to Celestial	6% to Divine	70.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Red	40% to Celestial	32% to Celestial	8% to Divine	60.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Celestial	No Charm	10% to Divine	8% to Divine	2% to Epic	0.00%	45% to Arcane	45.00%
	Superior Red	20% to Divine	16% to Divine	4% to Epic	0.00%	40% to Arcane	40.00%
	Silver	25% to Divine	20% to Divine	5% to Epic	0.00%	37.5% to Arcane	37.50%
Divine	No Charm	7.5% to Epic	6% to Epic	1.5% to Legendary	0.00%	0.00%	92.50%
	Superior Red	15% to Epic	12% to Epic	3% to Legendary	0.00%	0.00%	85.00%
	Silver	18.75% to Epic	15% to Epic	3.75% to Legendary	0.00%	0.00%	81.30%
Epic	No Charm	5% to Legendary	4% to Legendary	1% to Mythic	0.00%	0.00%	95.00%
	Superior Red	10% to Legendary	8% to Legendary	2% to Mythic	0.00%	0.00%	90.00%
	Silver	12.5% to Legendary	10% to Legendary	2.5% to Mythic	0.00%	0.00%	87.50%
Legendary	No Charm	2.5% to Mythic	Using a resplendent scroll does not change the odds. Also Items cannot upgrade past Mythic. (+2 Grades)		0.00%	0.00%	97.50%
	Superior Red	5% to Mythic			0.00%	0.00%	95.00%
	Silver	6.25% to Mythic			0.00%	0.00%	92.50%
Mythic	Highest Possible Item Grade	Highest Possible Item Grade				Highest Possible Item Grade	

Figure 1: Regrade Chance Table

The idea of this weapon is an informative based shared meaning, understood by a large majority of participants of the game, but to some it might have other values or experiences associated with such a phrase. Organic or cultural shared meanings would be specific to that group. These shared meanings can be expressed through inside jokes, shared experiences, events and or ideas specific to the discourse of the group.

The term social role can apply to many different areas of interest online. In relation to online gaming it will be evaluated in terms of members' responsibilities, type of membership and expectations of and for the group, being very similar to a social contract (Gleave, Welser, Lento and Smith 2009). Each of these factors has a large impact on interaction within the group as well as decision making and behavior of the individuals involved. With so many elements being part of a VC, what makes it successful and how that success is defined by the group can vary greatly.

In competitive games information such as the regrade chance table (Figure 1.1) are important for the success of a group. There are many in game mechanics and logistics which affect how the individuals of a group perform certain tasks to compete for objectives, resources or even improve personal skills, all of which are can promote the success of a group. When it comes to MMOG's knowledge is power, if one group has a better understanding of a game mechanic and can utilize it correctly it can mean the difference between victory and defeat for the respective groups.

Research of Massive Multiplayer Online Games

When it comes to research on MMOG's there has been very detailed research focusing on demographics of MMOG's as a whole (Yee 2006) This research however, often focuses directly on one particular online game: World of Warcraft also known as "WoW" (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore 2007). Research into WoW has laid the foundation for future studies on MMOG's prevalent social atmosphere and communications. The online world is constantly changing and the methods of communication and interaction between members in virtual communities is advancing in congruence with technology and the games played by people (Bell and Kozlowski. 2002). There have been several influential MMOG's within the last 3 years that have had very large user bases and impact on social environments online comparative to WoW. These include titles such as Guild Wars 2, Archeage, Black Desert Online and Destiny. The first 3 titles being PC (Personal Computer) games, and the last being for consoles such as PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. New titles are always on the horizon with different social aspects and implications that would be beneficial to study. A comparative

study between how members interact in different settings and VC based on game titles and platform could allow varying perspectives on experiences in online settings.

Therefore areas left unstudied include the evolution of social interaction over time in virtual communities, the effect leadership roles online can have in offline life, which types of community structures work best for communication and even the acquisition of trust between individuals online extending beyond in game trading. Another topic which has not been explored much is the acquisition and organization of information that online communities need in order to perform better than another VC. As in most competitive games knowledge can make the difference between victory and defeat. This research addresses the following topics on VCs: What are the dynamics of Virtual Communities and how are they created? Why do individuals chose this group over others? How are trust and social capital gained and lost between members online? I also examine the types of communication and social media members use outside of the game itself to interact with each other. This study seeks to explore some of these areas by using sociological field research methods of observation and semi structured interviews.

Methods

In order to better understand VCs I used qualitative field methods. For this topic qualitative research methods are best suited because numbers and statistics will not paint a clear, nuanced picture of how members interact on a social level with each other. Field methods allow for observations of others in the field without disturbances as well as letting the participants contribute their own experiences and stories clearly within the understood context. Being a member of this community allowed me to have a profoundly greater understanding of the perspectives of the people within this study and their unique culture pertaining to the game and environment which they are a part of. For those interviewed which were not part of the same community as myself, I was able to comprehend concepts and universal components of guilds and online communities to understand these individuals' stories and experiences.

I chose this topic for several reasons, but one of the largest factors was my access to this online community of people who play online games together on a regular basis. The games the group and individuals play can change often but the community retains a certain "core" group of members. I have interacted and made relationships with individuals and the group within this community both active and passively over 2 years. I was the original gatekeeper of this study which also allowed people to be comfortable while being interviewed and willing to participate. I also reached out to a friend of

mine who strives in being active in several guilds and communities at once, having many connections within a vast array of communities as a gatekeeper. With his help I was able to interview participants from other MMO games with larger populations. Some of these games have not been released yet, but several communities have already been established.

The second reason I chose this field of study is that it is a very interesting and different experience compared to face to face interactions. Almost all interactions between members occur in the form of voice communications through the PC program TeamSpeak 3 (referred to from here on as TeamSpeak) or Discord, and supplemented by text chat within the online games themselves, in this case being the Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) Archeage. Gaining access to the main community studied was not difficult as I have communicated and played games with some of the members heavily in the past. These factors allowed me to conduct semi-structured interviews with members of the group without constraints and allowed the members to feel comfortable sharing personal and specific content with me, as opposed to being a total stranger. Later during this study I found it beneficial to compare the experiences of players and guild leaders within the game Archeage to those of communities from other game titles. The games that some participants focused on either currently or in the past included Black Desert Online and Tales of Elyria, the first being an established game which has been available since March 3, 2016 in North America and the second not having an announced release date as of yet.

Research Field

I will go into further detail about the dynamics and functions of TeamSpeak referred to often as "TS" by players in text communications. This is an interesting field to investigate because of the many different components involved within this field and social setting. The field and access of the social environment is not rooted in one physical location or means of communication, but instead is made up of several varying components that create the online experience of MMOG's.

The common components or programs used include, but are not limited to, TeamSpeak , the Archeage game client, google drive applications (ex: google sheets and documents), Slack and even Facebook to interact and communicate between members. I will begin by describing in detail the anchor of online communication for groups, this being the most commonly used voice communication program that I have observed in groups within the Archeage community, being TeamSpeak .

Figure 2: TeamSpeak server

I observed individuals in the virtual setting of a TeamSpeak server in the context of the PC game Archeage. Associated with most highly social games with many players MMOG's are often TeamSpeak servers specific to individual groups (or guilds) which are a social setting for voice communication and a comfortable environment for members to share outside of the game itself.

Anyone can use this service to host a free server which allows for moderation and control of its members through the use of passwords and administrative powers, although there are some benefits to having a dedicated server with a small monthly subscription fee. Admins are able to rename channels, set privilege powers to allow others to join the channels and more. This program also allows for distinct organization of com-

munication between channels. Channels can be considered "rooms" where all members in the channel can talk freely with anyone else in the channel in a group setting, given that standard privileges have been distributed. Administrators are also capable of setting up "all-call voice binds" which allow them to make announcements to all members of the TeamSpeak server simultaneously. It is also possible to create channels which are password protected and other members cannot see the current members in said channel, either by having the privilege powers or asking a member with said powers to create the channel. This type of channel can be used for a private space, as well as for meetings of leadership members. I will describe in more detail the workings of TeamSpeak , as a strong understanding is essential to the communications involved.

To a first time user this interface can seem a bit overwhelming; however most of the TeamSpeak server features have been established by moderators and are rarely changed by users. On the left most portion of the window we see different colored chat bubbles with check marks (). These are individual channels within the entire server. Each member within a channel can hear and speak to each other freely without restrictions, given they have the right permissions or, most commonly referred to within groups, "tags" or "perms" given by administrators of the group. Tags allow a person to move freely between different channels, view the channels and their members and be given specific privileges or power within TeamSpeak. These tags can also be removed by administrators with ease. The purple "D" () (for Dysfunctional) tag allows these basic rights for members in this particular community.

Tags also have even more functions, such as specific voice communications that only members with a certain tag can hear (not common in this group but available for use) as well as permissions that grant only certain powers. During one of the interviews for example, the guild leader was able to unknowingly interrupt the interview by using an all-call bind that applied to all members with the Dysfunctional tag (), (which myself and the participant possessed) to advertise that he was in search of one more member to complete a dungeon within the game. These permissions or tags can be assigned by an administrator simply by right-clicking a user on the server and choosing from a list which permissions to grant the user. There are also small flags next to the user names that show their location in the world which are assigned by the TeamSpeak program through the use of IP address.

Another aspect used by some members within TeamSpeak is the use of soundboards. Soundboards are individually mapped sound files which can be played to all members within the room, often

times being references to common media such as movies, television or music. However, I have also noticed that on rare occasions these can be recordings of members of the online community when they have said something that is deemed interesting or humorous. The administrative and interaction tools were used in order to prevent interruptions during interviews; however, during regular observations no changes were made in order to avoid disrupting members' interactions. During these observations soundboards were used very few times by members, perhaps only once or twice. In past experiences their use was more prevalent; however, those members who participated in their use have not been present often within the TeamSpeak server during the time observations were conducted.

The game being observed in the virtual setting called Archeage is a free to play game which only requires the creation of an account and a download of the game to access although certain features are only available to "Patrons". Patrons have purchased a month-to-month subscription available through real money ($15 per month) or in game funds. The research field however is not limited to either TeamSpeak or the game Archeage; it is a dichotomy of the field itself. The main community studied and observed included both newer and older members. This was the only community closely observed due to my direct ties and ease of access to the field. Interviews however included individuals from different guilds and communities spanning more games than Archeage.

Observations

I observed players of Massive Multiplayer Online Games both in-game and on social media platforms outside of the game with a heavy focus on TeamSpeak. Within the game I observed how members interact in their respective guilds through text communications; this was achieved by being a member of the guild. In-game interactions included 1) observing players in popular locations such as in game cities with high user traffic and events the guild participated in together, 2) in game chat services and 3) spots in the world which require competition for resources between groups and individuals. These different locations were included in order to have a wide range of experiences within the game in order to better understand the game culture and without limiting the research to one specific location or set of interactions. I also accompanied players during the completion of in-game quests and dungeons which require cooperation between members. I also simply followed players for brief periods of time.

I believe both in-game and out of game (TeamSpeak) observations are both important to understanding the interactions of individuals and community members as a whole. TeamSpeak communications

are more personal and an established environment in which users will most likely be more comfortable with specific social norms and rules established already. The in-game behaviors of players could have a vast difference in range of interactions as they can have different standards and expectations of how players communicate based on their group (guild), playstyle or even server. Playstyle is how the individual chooses to play the game, some enjoy purposely harming and intruding on others, whereas some enjoy helping strangers or focus on personal advancement. Another possibility for observations within a game could have included the differences between players' behaviors and interactions of two different servers within the game. Servers are the same in terms of content and events but the populations are different as not everyone can fit comfortably on a single server, therefore there will be different people on different servers. I chose to focus on observing one server within the game as it was where the community being observed was located.

Semi-Structured Interviews

This research relied on qualitative sociological field research methods therefore interviews were essential. The majority of the members I interviewed were active or past members of the current community I was involved in (Archeage,) focusing heavily on members who have been a part of it for more than 3 months. The reason for this is that an accurate description of a community and its members depends on the individuals who have greatly or are still currently active in its social environment over a longer period of time. However, I also noticed the influx of activity of the online community was in sync with the game population itself; this made me turn my focus to some newer members as well as leaders of other communities in different games. These members had an influence on the guild at the time they were present, even if short lived. Some of the individuals I interviewed have managed guilds between the sizes of 40-1200 people. This could give great insight on the structure of their communities and its rules.

There was also variation to the type of questions asked to individuals who had little to no leadership experiences within online communities and those who have. For members that were not leaders I focused on the experiences they have had within the game themselves, as well as their experiences with leaders of their guilds. For those who have led guilds or been active members within the leadership of their communities or guilds, I inquired as to how a guild functions, the expectations of their members, struggles of a guild leader and also the size of their communities. Members interviewed outside of the main community were from different games and have

been in leadership roles in varying communities. To understand the structure of a VC it requires comparisons between others of its kind to be made.

I recruited members I knew personally by I simply stating my research topic and asked if they had any interest in helping me. For the individuals which I did not know personally a previous member of the main community observed connected me with several different people, each of which had been very active in leadership positions of their own guilds. Online interactions can be much easier and simple for some people especially in an online game setting with similar experiences, which made sharing these experiences easier.

The interviews took place in a TeamSpeak server with a specific channel only accessible by myself and the participant. Precautions were taken to prevent anyone else from disturbing or listening to the interview in order to assure accurate information and to maintain confidentiality. Precautions included having a specific channel for the location of the interview which can only be accessed with a password, as well as preventing anyone else from seeing the members of the channel to retain confidentiality.

The average length of interviews ranged between 17 to 60 minutes depending on the quality of responses. The participants' average age was 24 years old, the majority being in their early to mid-20's with two individuals ranging from 38-39 years of age and one being 53 years of age. Eight out of 10 participants were male and two out of 10 were female.

A standard interview protocol was used for each interview with slight variations to questions asked depending on the person interviewed. A copy of the protocol is available upon request.

Findings

Social Environment

In interpreting the data, I found that a large part of the reason members choose one group over another, as well as what being in a guild means to them is simply the connections and friendships that they form within their groups. Every participant interviewed in this study mentioned that they play online games for the social environment it offers. Tyrion was asked if they ever took other people's schedules into consideration for any reason. This person responded that their very early daily routine before getting ready for school included playing the game with others:

I mean it's nice, as I wake up at 4 in the morning for school, back in the day I could always rely on my Australians to be on Team Speak. For me to go play the game with, to go fish with or whatever. And I miss that, I miss that sooooo much! Aww you have no idea how much I miss that! That was great.

This goes to show how impactful these frequent social interactions can be for individuals within the group. From the data and interviews I found that many players simply enjoy the company of others in the online setting of MMO games.

At times there appears to be a stigma associated with online gaming which implies that the players are isolated or anti-social individuals. This is completely contradicted by my research. Every participant I interviewed mentioned in one way or another that they play online games to have fun with others, especially the frequent social interactions it provides. One individual named "Vinnie" mentions this concept of video games being perceived as a non-social activity:

So I think computer games are seen as this solitary endeavor when it's actually like an incredibly community driven thing. It's always about the people around you, and even the people you're against or with it's always just about people. The game play or the games are just a backdrop to that interaction

Tyrion mentions this when asked what drove him to create guides to help others:

I want to see the game in general doing well and I want to see the players within it progressing and enjoying it because obviously at the end of the day you can't have fun in a game without other people and if other people aren't having fun they are not going to stick around in the game.

This definitely emphasizes the focus MMO games have on the communities of the game as a whole as well as smaller more personal relationships with players within communities and guilds.

The friendships people have formed online also seem to be very similar to real life experiences for most. "Frosty" mentioned that: "It's the same as being in any group or community of friends, it's just the point is to have fun with people, like-minded people that share similar interests and goals.", when asked what being in a guild meant to them specifically. When asked about what future games "Pod" had in mind to play, "Pod" had an interesting response which gives insight into the ideal community for them:

I want to play another MMO with everybody, but I want to play one where my significant other can be involved again. And where people will like my significant other, so there's that....Plus I really love everybody in this community, and I really love my significant other, so I would just love if all the people I love could just get together and work well together.

What I found most interesting about this was the fact that the next MMO the person had in mind depended on the involvement of both their significant other and the community which they are currently part of, hoping for almost an ideal environment without any specific details on the game itself.

I also found that communities and guilds form similar to real life clubs, arising from close friends or individuals with similar interests and goals in mind. Participant "Curly" states that:

I think I'd have to say the guild is more of a social thing. It's just where a group of friends can catch up and do stuff together. You see those little social groups, everyone has a group of some sort. And they have clubs in real life, works the same way here.

Another individual from Ireland who has led several guilds mentions a similar scenario:

I suppose it's like any activity. If you go down to the local field and play football, that's soccer. With your friends, it's the same sort of thing. you just you enjoy doing the activity and I always find doing an activity with people I like is better that's what a guild means to me, doing something I already enjoy with people I enjoy which is like an exponentially more enjoyable experience

People tend to schedule much of their activities in online groups together. This was especially necessary for the main guild being observed as there were both Australian and American players working together. The guild leader of one group mentions:

We definitely run into a lot of problems of 'when do we schedule Guild meetings?' Because when the Americans are awake a lot of the Australians are at work. When the Americans are sleeping the Australians have come home from work and have gotten on the game. Realistically the only time we can do things is on the weekends but we can't do it on a Sunday for the Americans because it's a Monday for Australians. – "Mystagon"

Many other participants besides those living in vastly different time zones mentioned taking another person's schedule into consideration for both communications, organization to get things done as well as time set aside to simply enjoy the game together.

Toxicity

On a competitive basis when the stakes are high VCs seem to interact with others in a very toxic manner when they are on the winning side; but in standard competition there is a much more sportsmanlike conduct between players in groups. When asked about his reactions when winning "Darius" states: "if I kick someone's ass I like to shit talk them;" However, when I asked if they act similar when losing he responded: "Not really, I'm more so trying to figure out why I lost. Not shit talking all that much because I lost.". A similar response came from "Frosty" who compares the attitude of toxic players, with the board game Monopoly.

The toxicity and the negative attitude, I always equate it back to like playing Monopoly with that kid that just flips the board when he lands on Boardwalk it's like you know the game might not have been over but now you did end it and that's what it's like when you're playing with a toxic player.

This topic of toxicity was brought up without prior context by another respondent when asked what would make him dislike one group more than another. He says;

Toxicity to be honest that's about it. Players that... specifically people that are winning and they start bragging about things and they start talking down to other players that maybe aren't as ahead in the game as they are stuff like that. Anybody that puts other players down for no real reason other than their own personal gain or personal accomplishment...I can't stand players like that because it just drives people away. – "Tyrion"

Another respondent "Mystagon" mentions the reasoning behind why someone might be toxic in an online game setting:

Everyone is toxic in their own right. Everyone has things that piss them off so they act out. In an online game you don't have to be mature or tolerant about anything you can just let everything go because you've got a screen in front of you no one can really see who you are. You've got a massive anonymity, in terms of your character in game. A lot of people take that and really abuse it. In terms of just being racist or abusive to just downright childish.

Building Trust Online

Building trust online was harder for most people than in real life. Often trust was determined by the behaviors and personalities of others but also included a vouching system from trusted individuals. However, the main way for trust to be built between players was through social interaction, exclusively in the form of voice

chat, not text. The reason for this was that people could identify personalities and behaviors much better to determine the trustworthiness of the individual. "Darius" states that: "if you don't talk like in voice I won't trust you at all". "Tyrion" mentions a similar reason with a bit more elaboration on the behaviors of the person needed to gain their trust:

…sitting and talking to me for an extended period of time and over time you slowly start to trust people, also just seeing their behavior and interaction with other players is a huge one like if I know they've had a situation to break somebody else's trust and they chose not to because they don't feel like it's a good thing to do.

The common theme among people interviewed seemed to be that trust depended on the environment created by the game but relied mostly on the behaviors and personalities of the people involved, these having to be gauged by the individual deciding whether or not they can be trusted. "Vinnie" states that:

I think there are just certain traits and behaviors that would signal to me that someone is trustworthy. And likewise their signals and traits and behaviors that signal to me that people are untrustworthy. I can't really describe them in detail it's sort of almost like an intuition that you build up from interacting with people and talking to people as you would in any sort of social endeavor.

In regards to communication outside of the VC's TeamSpeak, all but one participant used some other form of media to keep in contact with other players. The only participant which was against adding others to social media outside his realm of games mentioned it would "break the immersion of the game" meaning that it interfered with the intended experience of the game itself.

My research also recreated another interesting concept I noticed between two different guild leaders. This occurred when asking the question: "If you have made guides or organized information for others about a game, what drove you to do this?" Both respondents mentioned that they did not personally make any guides but rather enjoyed showing the members how to perform the task themselves, and the personal satisfaction they had from watching the player learn and advance themselves. The first leader "Mystagon" said:

That's the biggest thing about being a leader of a community it is being able to teach someone something and then have them execute it. It's extremely rewarding especially once you do that content and you can hand out a nice item or an achievement to someone

The second guild leader "Vinnie" mentions:

Sort of an enjoyable social experience to guide someone from being a total clueless person into finally being able to... for example in a PVP game, you bring someone into the game and they can't kill a single person. Then you spend a bit of time with them and teach them some ideas and mechanics behind the game, and they go around and they are killing everyone. It is really satisfying to help people on that journey to find enjoyment in the game

Organization of leadership roles, focusing on a delegation of labor within a group and also acquiring knowledge and information was deemed highly important to these members of guilds who had high expectations for the groups in which they were involved. These themes were particularly present in groups who sought to compete against others and worked towards "end-game content" which was referred to as the ultimate goal.

Leadership Structures

For those actual leader or leaders within a community a few different approaches as to how decisions are made and who runs the guild operation were mentioned.

"Frosty" states:

The ones that are usually successful have an authoritarian rule like dictatorship with a small council of sympathizers for the plebs. It's usually the most successful guild structure and I think it's just because players are attracted to organization and structure and when the game doesn't hand you organization or structural tools players are going go to the most structurally sound locations they can find.

Another similar account is given by "Vinnie":

Typically they tend to be dictatorships. There is this really strange thing that happens online where democracy just creates problems. So it's much better to in my opinion run these sort of communities as a sort of benevolent dictatorship.

Beyond the authoritarian structure of leaderships also mentioned were those of a somewhat democratic system, in which there was a small group which worked together to come to decisions for the rest of the group. "Mystagon" mentions this:

Leadership structure has always basically been a counsel sort of system. It's the best way to allow everyone to have a voice, everyone be heard but at the end the leader ultimately makes a decision otherwise it can get a bit 50-50 on what everyone wants and someone does need to step in and sort of make that decision.

A supporting account to this comes from "Tyrion" who states:

Most of them have always been relatively the same you have kind of one person who is the voice of the community and then that person will have co-leadership basically I guess where they kind of speak their opinions to the head more or less. Then decisions are made based of that it's all fairly open I guess people have the ability to voice their opinions, everybody has an equal say when decisions are made off of the general consensus of everybody's opinions.

There also was consensus on the role of an officer within the guild. The roles were based on what roles were needed most and or delegated by the leader. However, officers were also often mentioned as someone to keep the peace and even as a human resources position at times, as well as being the voice of different groups or cliques within the guild as a whole.

"Frosty" describes this at length:

I *think an officer's role more so than anything is to provide the small council sympathizer aspect and make sure that people's voices and opinions are heard and that the clever ones are filtered out and put through to the guild leader so that the idea doesn't look like a guildy (guild member) is telling a guild leader what to do it is that he's voicing their concerns to the officer and the officer discusses it with the GM...it creates a degree of separation between the GM and the average guildy which is good because you want the GM to be a little bit revered otherwise they lose that fear and respect right? You want to be both feared and respected to be a successful guild leader so having a degree of separation you have good guys in the middle it sort of helps that a lot and obviously officers also generally represent smaller groups of communities within the guild because in most situations a guild of 50 members plus it's hard for every single one of them to be a friend of each other. So often times officer rankings will grow and shrink depending on the number of cliques in a guild and the officers will be there to generally manage the discourse between the cliques.*

"Patches" added that "an officer is just a person who delegates authority and it would depend on what they've been delegated to do and then that would be the role… or teaching new players things. Every facet of the game can be delegated to."

A more detailed description is described by "Vinnie":

That entirely depends on the context of the officer's role. An officer could be something as simple as leading an engagement. He might just be leading a squad. An officer could also completely vary to managing the entire economy in an advanced game system. So it really depends on the context but generally speaking it would be to

provide a buffer zone between the top-level leadership and the general membership with regards to answering questions, providing training, and resolving interpersonal disputes basic sort of leadership.

Real Money Trade

I also became more aware of how prevalent Real Money Trade (RMT) was between some players just from observations, and later asking whether or not the person had participated in RMT either as a buyer or seller of goods. At least half of those interviewed mentioned they did participate in these activities. However one individual was strongly against this. "Dolphy" said:

Well let's put it this way I as a person who has tested a lot of games and is in a Guild that is very strict about NDA's (non-disclosure-agreement) and that sort of thing. If I'm being an honest person I would never do something that was illegal. So if it was legal... I suppose I might if somebody had something I really wanted. I never played the game but I knew somebody that used to make things in Second Life and sell them and he supposedly earned a lot of money doing that he said. That was a legal thing as far as I know. So if I really wanted the item then I suppose I might, but typically no. I don't do that, I don't see a reason for it.

Offline Interactions

Very interesting are those occasions when online communities meet those close friends or community members in the real world. A few of the individuals interviewed have actually met others in real life whom they had originally only met through their online communities, with a common interest in video games.

Often times location seemed to be the leading reason as to why people did not meet up with others; however, this did not mean that everyone was eager to meet others, as the friendships often times revolve around the games that are played, but not in other parts of their lives. One individual dubbed "Patches" mentions that he does not like meeting others in real life due to this reason:

I knew they lived...like 20 hours' drive away, but happened to be flying down to where I lived...and not wanting to be an absolute dick I didn't say "oh I don't want to see you" but I was most definitely hoping their flight didn't take place...contrary to my belief there was no downside to that meeting... it does make things a bit awkward. But at the end of the day I guess it's something I prefer not to do but I guess when I do it, I don't mind as much...it's all right, I just prefer not to.

A more humorous example includes "Mystagon" who tells a story of exchanging a case of beer for a computer:

Yeah so the computer I'm using right now. We realized that one of the guys in the Guild lived around the corner from me and he was like "Oi you need a new computer? I'll trade you this computer for a case of beer" so I went down to the shops, bought a case of beer and rocked up to his house and traded a case of beer for a computer!

Discussion

As a result of my research, I found a highly social environment for players involved with MMO games, focusing mainly on voice communications but also having contact with others outside of the game itself, such as through Facebook, Skype, Discord and other forms of social media. Participants also often spoke fondly of their past experiences with others in online games, having a particular focus on the friends and relationships they have made over time, many of which were still active. I believe this to be one of the most important parts of this study as the members involved in online communities form very active friend groups and appear to maintain friendships over long periods of time distance and even through different cultures of the world. This was definitely supported by literature work by Gunawardena (2009) which focused on overcoming great distances between individuals. The success of a virtual community is definitely determined by social factors and the software functionality (Souza and Preece 2004).

Both of these works have similar conclusions on the success of VCs. The data presented in this study also supports these statements as technology has been ever advancing in the online world, especially in the MMO world, but the social aspect still remains an integral part of a VC's success. There have also been allusions by participants that those who do not participate in online games are often seen as anti-social or isolated individuals, when in fact my findings suggest the opposite. Previous research is very similar as Souza states: "What is quite clear from

the number of vacant community spaces on the Internet is that technology alone, even state of the art technology, does not guarantee a successful online community. Success is determined by social factors (i.e. sociability) as well as software functionality and usability. In fact, in some communities sophisticated software design seems to have little impact. However, well designed software can make a successful community even more successful" (Souza 2004:580).

Not everything is perfect in online communities, however. Often brought up by participants was the topic of toxicity also known as being excessively rude and detrimental to social experiences, toxicity being essentially bad sportsmanship within games. These behaviors and actions very rarely occurred between members in the same group. Instead players were toxic to members outside of their group. These conflicts occurred mainly due to competition between other players and were especially present when players could rob and attack one another for personal gain of resources or even personal satisfaction, which the game mechanics themselves allowed and at times promoted. These reactions of toxicity from others were always shunned by the participants who spoke of their experiences. The reasons for these negative reactions were the time and effort involved with accomplishing tasks, which could then be denied by others; these certainly evoked a negative response by the players. My findings are not reflected in previous research as reviewed by this work; however, further investigation into literature focusing on the toxicity of players within MMO games would allow for a comparison.

Another interesting concept was the difference in personality and ideals of players who were often just members in groups, and those who would lead them. The leaders preferred to teach through active participation, opposed to a stand-alone guide or tutorial to teach their members how to perform or learn tasks. I believe this to be the case due to time constraints on the leaders as well as their personality. The guild leaders who were against creating guides mentioned the satisfaction they would receive from advancing a player with little to no understanding of the topic, to attaining the skills simply through demonstration and practice. This process of growth was what the leaders enjoyed most about working and leading others in MMO games.

The leadership structures within guilds also seemed to follow a few common principles in regards to the role of assigned officers within the guilds. These officers would be appointed by the leader and often times were representative of the smaller groups they came from when they were in a counsel setting of rule with the leader. Officers however also seem to be the driving force of these communities,

working to pick up any slack. The positions and responsibilities of officers vary greatly depending on the game itself as well as the structure of the community. Some officers might be assigned to perform certain tasks within the game that can only be done by assigned leaders within said game. However a large portion of responsibilities of these officers within the community depended on the delegation from the leader as well as what specific tasks need to be completed. These officers can be delegated to perform a very wide range of tasks, often one or more specific task per officer. These could include leading others in player versus player (PVP) engagements, player versus environment (PVE), guild economy and assets, to recruitment of newer players and even a form of human resource positions. The positions depend on the needs and interests of the community or guild as a whole and will be delegated as such.

Trust is also an essential part of online communities. Trust was built between members simply through interactions with other people. The main route of gaining a person's trust relied on voice communications through programs such as TeamSpeak or Discord. It was agreed by participants that text chat did not allow for an individual to read the intentions or personality of others. Voice communications did allow for trust to be built over time. This does not mean that anyone with whom a person talked would simply be trusted with either in game currency, items or real money. This is the most common way trust was formed but it was also relative to the individual, who ultimately had to weigh whether or not they could trust this person or not. The literature closely related to building trust in online communities (Ba 2001) investigates trust through repeated interactions as well as being part of a group which boasts a particular reputation or a network of trust. The findings in this study enhance the research conducted previously as it includes a voucher system but also takes into consideration the presence of others in online communities through the supplemental technology of voice communications, allowing for more personal relationships. The vouching system within groups simply relied on the approval or referral of a trusted person. If someone needed to make sure that someone could be trusted, there was a social method to determine this. The individual (Person A) asked a person whom they already trust greatly (Person B) if an unknown or new individual could be trusted (Person C). If Person (B) says they can, then Person (A) would then most likely trust Person (C), through a vouching system.

Lastly, this research has shown the effect technology is having on online communities within games. Through the use of technology it allows for groups to maintain high levels of interaction and organization of members. This is done through both voice platforms such

as TeamSpeak as well as more common forms of social media such as Facebook. Previous research has shown the advantages technology creates for groups online.

Conclusion

This research did come across some limitations, one of which being the decline of active players both within the group observed and as a whole for the original game being observed. This decrease in activity between members prevented supplemental evidence such as personal interactions between many members simultaneously through text chat within the game. Many of the leaders of prominent guilds within the game Archeage were suspicious and turned off by the idea of conducting an interview about their communities. However this did allow me to reach out to many more community leaders of other games who were much more responsive and allowed for a broader spectrum of responses about online communities. Another part which made the research process more difficult than it needed to be was the extensive list of interview questions. The questions were all in relevance to online communities but did not always focus on the leadership of guilds, causing the interviews to vary greatly in length, preventing more time to be used on observations and research. To combat this the amount of questions were greatly reduced and also when interviewing guild leaders or those who have managed communities the questions catered more towards their leadership and experiences with the groups they managed.

The largest limitation with this form of research however was the lack of information and accessibility to similar literature works and research. Most data and research focused on much broader topics such as online communities which are not specific to online games. There was little information to use as a solid anchor of ideas which related directly to VCs based on MMO games and especially the differing types of leadership structures. Future research topics that should be explored would include the prevalence of Real Money Trade (RMT) within MMO communities outside of the specific game studied, the characteristics and personalities different leaders hold both in small and large scale groups, the varying types of guild structures as well as a more detailed look into how communication technologies influence the relationships players build online with others. Other topics that could also find interesting results include: Reasons as to women being less frequent or known in online communities, how the mechanics of a game and structure affect how a community structures their leadership, time management skills of players of MMO games and also how different platforms of communication such as TeamSpeak and Discord affect and build a community.

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