Abstract

Gaming communities have radically changed the way people interact with one another and its instant nature for people all over the world, allows people to interact and also escape in a way they could never do offline. Although online gaming has been questioned over whether it's a legitimate community, we see that it has many similar attributes of a physical community and also many advantages, such as no geographical boundaries. Gaming communities can be seen as a 'third place' in which people interact in a way that they are unable to in their first place (home) and second place (work). All these concepts will then be explored in the Massively multiplayer online game World of Warcraft, a game which has substantial communities within the game and uses other mediums. It will also explore how gaming capital can directly translate to social capital and what it means to have 'gaming capital'.

Gaming communities have radically changed the way people interact online and its instant nature for people globally allows people to interact and 'escape' in a way they could never do offline. There have been many arguments against the legitimacy of gaming communities and whether they should be classified as 'real communities'. Critics of online communities write that "life on the net can never be meaningful or complete because it will lead people away from the full range of in person contact. Or, conceding half the debate, they worry that people will get so engulfed in a simulacrum virtual reality, that they will lose contact with "real life' (Wellman & Gulia,1997). This paper will argue that gaming communities are genuine communities which allow gamers to engage with each other in ways that offline communities never could, creating an 'escape' for those who struggle with being a part of offline communities.

Gaming as a community

For a long time, there was questions over the legitimacy of online communities and their realness from scholars, "while all this razzle-dazzle connects us electronically, it disconnects us from each other, having us "interfacing" more with computers and TV screens than looking in the face of our fellow human beings' (Fox, 1995, p. 12). This is simply untrue, and just like in a real life community we see different types of virtual communities are emerging and at the forefront of these is the gaming community. There are many elements that make up a gaming community, A community is a group of people who come together to share similarities and interests. Preece defines online communities as "people who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs to perform special roles. They also have a shared purpose, an interest or need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for community. A community has policies, rituals, protocols and laws that guide people's interactions. Computer systems support and mediate the online communities." (Preece, 2000). All of these elements Preece associates with online communities, particularly the shared purpose and interest, are integral parts of the gaming community. People who are part of online gaming communities all have the shared interest of the game and the games proved a reason for community. These are all factors that make up the vast world that is the gaming community.

How gaming communities differ from offline communities

The major differences of gaming communities when compared to offline communities are what makes them such a popular alternative for people who struggle fitting into physical communities. For example, being able to interact with someone from the other side of the world in a game, or being able to switch off and stop interaction whenever they want and being able to find people with shared interests because you have so much more reach. Within each game there is a community of people with at least one common interest, the game itself, and the community is only limited by a person's access to that game. With no physical space needed to form the community gamers socialise with each other through the medium of the game, many games encouraging communication from players and teamwork

to succeed. With no real restrictions on members of the gaming community they "attempt to break through some of the boundaries of race, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location established in physical communities" (Gross, Katz and Rice, 2003). Gaming communities are absent of any real institutional authority and emerge from technology, compared to offline communities which will often have institutional authority and have physical borders and exclude people gaming has a voluntary participation by its members (Katz et al., 2004). This voluntary participation from members and no physical borders are the main reasons the gaming community allows people to interact in a way they could never do in a physical community. People from all different parts of the world, from all walks of life, are brought together in way they never could before, and use these new formed relationships to engage with the game by playing, chatting and connecting with other platforms created by the game.

Gaming as 'Third Place'

'Third Place' refers to the social surrounding which is different to your two usual surroundings, those usually being home (first place) and work (second place). Ray Oldenburg's book 'The Great Good place' talks about the theory of Third Place stating that "individuals may belong to several formal organizations but if they have a third place it is apt to make them feel more a part of the community than those other memberships" (Oldenburg, 1999). The gaming community provides a 'Third Place' for its members and allows interactions with it fellow members in a way that communities at home and work cannot. In the reading 'Online games as 'third places'' they explore gaming as the 'third place' in Massively multiplayer online video games (MMO). They explore how "By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new "third place" for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old." (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006). All of Oldenburg (1999) criteria of the third place are met by online games, such as a neutral ground, communication, easy access and a home away from home. Although there are arguments against a game being a 'place' it is a space where people can come together to interact and a form a community and that's why gaming is an example of a 'third place' for so many people around the world.

World of Warcraft

If we now look specifically at the game World of Warcraft (WoW) and how it changed the way people interact and allows people to interact in a way they could never do offline. 'World of Warcraft (WoW) is one of the most popular massively multiplayer games (MMOs) to date, with more than 6 million subscribers worldwide' (Ducheneaut Yee, Nickell & Moore, 2006) , players can play against the environment or they can play against one another, players can also choose to role-play. The journal article 'the social life of guilds in World of Warcraft' explored the social dynamics of the game and its players. There studies discovered that "players were found to use the game to extend real-life relationships, meet new people, form relationships of varying strength, and also use others merely as a backdrop. The key moderator of these outcomes appears to be the game's mechanic, which encourages some kinds of interactions while discouraging others." (Williams et al., 2006). This shows that MMO such as WoW are so popular not just because of the gameplay but because of the relationships they can facilitate through the games mechanics. When people of shared interest are coming together to discuss create and play, they are fulfilling the elements scholars define to be what is needed for a community. Which further proves how games are radically changing the way people interact. When studying the relationships within the guilds, they found that they meant far more then the functional purposes they posses in the game (Williams et al., 2006). The studies found that "In nearly every social guild that lasted more than a month, members and leaders were aware of the need for a certain level of maturity, responsibility, and player welfare. This level of what can only be described as caring is remarkable given that the game is centred ostensibly around functional, not psychological or social goals. It is clear that social guilds go well past the game's goals in creating and maintaining communities." (Williams et al., 2006). All their findings found the MMO of WoW to be a game where the games format encouraged interaction and successfully developed relationships and attributes of a community. Concluding that "WoW is in fact a vibrant third place, populated with a range of social experiences ranging from ephemeral impersonal groups to sustained and deep relationships that extend offline." (Williams et al., 2006).

Online gaming and Social Capital

Social capital is a form of cultural capital where social networks and groups are central to your influence. Social capital, is an integral part of analysing relationships and personal interactions and can be seen in gaming communities like World of Warcraft. The gaming mechanics for MMO affects how important it is for the players to co-operate and compete with others and how useful it is to form different kinds of sub-communities with people of greater ability establishing a higher social capital in the gaming communities. This bridging of social capital into the online gaming communities can be have positive affects on an individuals overall social capital. The journal article "Gaming Social Capital: Exploring Civic Value in Multiplayer Video Games" looks at gaming social capital and "Theorizes that gamers who develop ties and work together with a community of fellow gamers build gaming social capital, one's sense of belonging to and participating in a gaming community which can be leveraged for individual benefit or collective good. In other words, the concept of social capital recognizes that there is some value inherent in one's connections to other community members" (Molyneux, Vasudevan & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015) This further proves the value of being in a gaming community and why online gaming is a 'third place' for people to interact and react to others, with the study finding that "multiplayer video games are indeed associated with forming social ties within a community of gaming peers, a concept we call gaming social capital. This concept is distinct from but theoretically and empirically related to broader face-to-face social capital. Results suggest that gamers who develop gaming social capital are likely to develop face-to-face ties with others in their real-world community. Thus we observe a spill over effect from gaming social capital to social capital in the real world." (Molyneux, Vasudevan & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015) This development of face-to-face ties and a spill over of social capital in the physical world shows how influential the interactions which take place online in video games can be.

Conclusion

Online Gaming communities have radically changed the way people can interact with one another and allows people to network in a way they could never do offline. Although there are arguments against the value of virtual communities and its 'razzle dazzle' from scholars such as Fox, its been proven that the attributes of a virtual gaming community have many advantages over physical communities, such as successfully breaking down boundaries of race, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location established in physical communities" (Gross, Katz and Rice, 2003). Gaming is a 'third place' for many people and it allows people to interact in a way that there first place (home) and second place (work) don't allow. The MMO game World of Warcraft is an example of a third place and the interactions that take place. The way these gaming communities grow as a 'third place' then begins to establish an order of social capital within its members.

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