Stream: Communities and Online Games

Virtual Gaming Communities: In the Realms of the Everlasting Alliances

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Abstract

In the past decades, online gaming has instilled itself in a prime spot in the entertainment industry. With millions of gamers all around the world, the focus is on the numerous online gaming communities growing exponentially and the social capital they bring along. This study aims to deconstruct the online gaming experience by using First-Person Shooter games (FPSGs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMORPGs). These two distinct gameplays have huge fan followings and the online game spaces have allowed interactive and long-lasting bonds amongst the players. Further research is done to understand the online gaming communities as "third places", how virtual identities have a positive impact on one's sense of self and also how virtual communities promote social engagement by blurring geographical, physical, religious, ethnical, cultural, and temporal boundaries amongst others. There is no denying that online gaming has brought about a revolutionary means of developing virtual communities and promoting digital identities and these communities are here to stay.

Virtual Gaming Communities: In the Realms of the Everlasting Alliances

New media including the Internet and video games have become one of the topics widely discussed and researched, in the past decades, by scholars and academics. Online gaming platforms have provided alternate spaces for communication, cooperation, social interaction and forming relationships which overcome mere physical and cultural boundaries. Some of the underlying studies have focused on the accumulation of social capital derived from online gaming and the communities formed within the realm of gamers. A fascinating side of the digital gaming culture, namely, the motivation of the gamers to stay loyal or committed to certain guilds (Hsiao & Chiou, 2012, p. 75) – online gaming communities – is also looked at to better understand social gaming experiences. This paper digs deeper into the theories put forward by previous research on how online gaming communities are presently referred to as "third places" (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p. 889) that aim to promote connectivity, social engagement, collaboration and integration whilst influencing the concept of identity on a personal level, and in terms of group identity. These types of mediated communication and communities have increased the social capital among gamers without disrupting society or alienating non-gamers.

Based on Baudrillard's frame of work (1995, p. 6) and with the backing of Frostling-Henningsson (2009, p. 557), it is reiterated that virtual communities, part of the computer-generated virtual worlds, are but extensions to reality itself: hyperrealities. The paper will firstly focus on deconstructing First-Person Shooter games (FPSGs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMORPGs) in order to showcase how online gaming has instilled meaningful communication and long-lasting virtual communities without catering for prejudices, stereotypes and discriminations. Next, the various motivational factors which attract gamers and keep them coming back for more will be looked at while underlining "the relationship between the psychological needs of the user and the social gaming situations provided by the virtual environment…" (Di Loreto & Gouaïch, 2010, p. 1). Thirdly, this exposé will address the perception of self and others as virtual identities through the online gaming communities. Needless to say, that the social capital gained through playing online games and integrating gaming communities allows for a growth in a player's network and develops a sense of loyalty

amongst gamers. Online communities have persevered throughout temporal and spacial dimensions given their intangible and unrestrictive characteristics. Digital gaming platforms have but reinforced and strengthened the lifespan of these virtual communities whilst enabling gamers to identify themselves freely and assert their virtual self with conviction.

Digital Gameplay Experiences

Understanding FPSGs and MMORPGs

As mentioned at the beginning, "the desire to play is triggered by the interaction between personal and environmental factors" (Di Loreto & Gouaïch, 2010, p. 1); in this case, FPSGs and MMORPGs are the environment and more specifically, Call of Duty and World of Warcraft respectively. The online gaming platforms mentioned are two of the most popular games in the world and ranked amongst the best in their respective genre. Millions of players log in daily and as pointed out by Koivisto (2003, para 5), the interaction between players is the turning point that impacts on the gaming experience of the gamer. This interaction can be both verbal and non-verbal communication, without exiting the realm of the gameplay; some of FPSGs' and MMORPGs' non-verbal communication would include character's clothing and accessories, the actions undertaken, the in-game guilds chosen, and the way players' chosen characters move in a given scene. On the other hand, the online aspect of gaming allows for an optimum use of technology and the Internet in terms of verbal communication. The latter can be either synchronous or asynchronous and one-to-one or one-to-many communications. Gamers constantly maintain contact and follow each other's progress in the game through private messages, group chats, in-game chats and conversations, system broadcasts, discussion forums.

World of Warcraft is a MMORPG taking place on a fictional and fantasy world called Azeroth whereby the Alliance (heroes) and the Horde (villains) are fighting the ultimate battle. The appealing features of World of Warcraft include attractive graphics and audio, action sequences, narratives, and character customisations – such as name, gender, race, class, faction, and so on. World of Warcraft's storyline highlights how "players create an avatar that evolves and interacts with other avatars in a persistent virtual world" (Billieux et al., 2013, p. 1). World of Warcraft can be played in three different dimensions, namely, "player versus player (PvP),

player versus environment (PvE), and role-playing (RP)" (Williams et al., 2006, p. 342). Role-playing allows gamers to follow their chosen and customised characters, alongside other members of the same guild, throughout quests and adventures as they defeat enemies, acquire new skills and gain new levels. Williams et al. (2006, p. 340) explains how World of Warcraft is equivalent to "a vibrant third place", housing and inspiring social bonds no matter how impersonal or meaningful they can become. The in-game experience amounts to life-like experiences that allow for "social interaction and relationships" (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p. 889).

Moving on to the example illustrating FPSGs, Call of Duty, this game franchise allow players to live through a series of missions and challenges by enacting a character. And as the genre of the game suggests it, the main objective of the chosen character is to shoot other characters. Frostling-Henningsson (2009, p. 557) explains how the virtual world of Call of Duty transports the gamers to a fantasy world which aims to make "the impossible possible", that is shoot and kill people. FSPGs offer a more intensive gameplay as gamers could play synchronously in cyberspace. Shooters usually play in teams or groups of the same online community (guild) competing against each other. The game design and the narrative of the FSPGs are constructed far from the reality and its occurrences; a motivating point for gamers to take out their frustration (unleash their wrath) in the virtual world whilst knowing that such behaviour is condemned in real life. From Frostling-Henningsson's (2009, p. 562) point of view, playing FSPGs "can be interpreted as a way of connecting to people, connecting as 'brothers in blood'".

Online Gaming Communities: An Insight

With millions of gamers around the world, the focus is on the numerous online gaming communities growing exponentially and the social capital they bring along. In retrospective, it is very clear that "online gaming was first and foremost about communication" (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, 558) and the Internet greatly facilitated this worldwide connectivity. The two distinct online games mentioned above have huge fan followings with online game spaces which have allowed interactive and long-lasting bonds amongst players. Online communities create bridges to overcome physical distance and time disparities for gamers to mingle, share and

interact with each other. This continuous increase in social engagement is the foundation of strong and long-lasting online gaming communities. Trepte et al. (2012, p. 832) highlight the fact that socialising is the strongest pull for gamers to start engaging in a particular online game. Following the same line of thought, online gaming communities regroup players in in-game guilds and teams; and studies show that "social online gaming could accordingly strengthen existing friendship ties and create new ones by providing a shared focus of activity" (Domahidi et al., 2014, p. 109). Meng et al. (2015, p. 19) address the "multimodal connectedness" that exists amongst players given the numerous communication channels available to them via the gaming platforms. The study about "multimodal connectedness" brings forth the use of various in-game communication channels to increase trust amongst gamers and therein encourage community-building.

In-Game Friendships

When it comes to socialising on online gaming platforms, Kowert and Oldmeadow (2015, p. 556) point out that gamers acquire "a sense of closeness, belonging, and security" from the attachments from other members in the online communities. The popularity and accessibility of online video games have been associated to the increase of a player's social circle. Engaging in social gaming undeniably facilitates interactions between a player and his entourage that gradually lead to friendships. As explained by Kowert et al. (2014, p. 385), gaming community members are not just online acquaintances, the relationships are meaningful and as real as ever:

> "One's co-players are often more than just individuals who help achieve in-game instrumental goals. Co-players often become close, trusted friends and valued sources of online advice".

Furthermore, Trepte et al. (2012, p. 838) reveal how online gaming proves to be "a valuable social resource" that offers potential for offline friendships from the social capital gained by gamers online. Another important aspect of forming attachments, specifically friendships in gaming communities, is how "socially phobic players may employ online games to satisfy social relational needs while avoiding stress experienced in offline social environments" (Sioni et al., 2017, 12). This clearly depicts the positive impacts that online gaming communities have on players and their self-perception. As friendships and bonds are formed in the digital world, people grow closer emotionally and allow for the perseverance of online social support.

Social Virtual Identities

Digital self-production is the primary asset for someone to belong in an online community. In order to be properly represented and recognised online, a player ought to build an image of himself or herself through their characters in a game and the roles they carry out, which is referred to as an avatar. In some cases, this simulated version of a gamer becomes as real as life itself. MMORPGs give players the chance to overcome any sort of boundaries, socially and culturally, and also enhance their self-esteem (Sioni et al, 2017, p. 11). Developing a virtual identity is subjective yet gamers also have a group identity when they form part of a particular community. Fraser et al. (2014, p. 523) similarly advocates that "an individual's differentiation and integration within a group structure shape the individual's identity development as it relates to and influences their group identity".

In some instances though, worried parents, teachers, and the media amongst others have brought up a lot of concerning issues about whether or not online gaming could be addictive and harmful when it came to young adults and teenagers. The media primarily associated the violence in games to teenagers' aggressivity and unwillingness to follow societal rules. The information gathered from the study about Internet gaming disorder carried out by King et al. (2016, p. 493) explain that understanding the profound gaming behaviour and how withdrawal symptoms from online gaming could be summed to the simple fact that the players would feel bored, miss their online friends and even lack mental stimulation. No serious case of addiction to gaming has been reported and researchers still find themselves uncertain to characterise online gaming using addiction or violence concepts. On the opposite hand, some studies mention how "virtual worlds hold great potential for the psychological growth of its users" (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015, p. 557).

The above argument all but reaffirms the notion that social virtual identities are growing exponentially and they undeniably hold quite an importance in online communities. Williams et al. (2006, p. 358) demonstrate in their research the lengths gamers, specifically in MMORPGs, would go to maintain their virtual identities, acknowledge the other online personas around them in the digital world and thus creating the adequate platform for emotional and social support. The

latter further show how online gaming communities empower gamers to construct their own identity virtually and reap the benefits in terms of "psychological growth" (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015, p. 557). The online communities also bring forth Belk's (2013, p. 477) concept of "extended self"; whereby gamers are presented with an opportunity to re-invent or embody a virtual identity. Individuals hold their online avatars vigorously close to their hearts. In the case of MMORPGs, "the player *is* the character. You're not role-playing a being, you *are* that being; you are not assuming an identity, you *are* that identity; you are not protecting a self, you *are* that self" (Bartle, 2004, p. 155). Gamers get so immersed in their virtual identities that everything in the digital world becomes as real as reality itself be it the gameplay or the relationships and the communities they belong to therein, the assertion of a group identity.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, a deeper analysis of the function and dynamics of online gaming communities has been carried out. It is crucial to point out the qualifying features of these virtual environments: first and foremost, online communities ease interaction and communication without any time or space constraints and secondly, they give members a sense of belonging that transcends any social awkwardness or any phobias gamers undergo in real life on a daily basis. Steinkuelher and Williams (2006, p. 903) note that online communities' "relationships can broaden social horizons or world-views, providing access to information and new resources". Additionally, there has been numerous research conducted on how online gaming and the virtual identity have positively impacted on a gamer's personal opinion of himself (Sioni et al., 2017, p. 15). Player-to-player interactions have encouraged collaboration, participation, teamwork and even friendships in both FPSGs and MMORPGs; this clearly shows that the social aspect of online gaming platforms and online communities motivates gamers while allowing a continuance to the gameplay. Personalised avatars and screen names are the stepping stones into the aesthetically pleasing virtual world that is online gaming. A player's expertise increases accordingly with his time spent in the game and on the online communities. The learning curve for a gamer happens alongside other players and no one is left out. Gaming communities provide both online and offline support as research has shown. A recurring point in several studies is that newbies start playing an online game – whether out of curiosity or boredom or on someone's recommendations – but ultimately stick around on the virtual platforms because of the interactive

guilds and gaming communities. There is no denying that online gaming has brought about a revolutionary means of creating and maintaining virtual communities along with long-lasting ties amongst gamers; and these communities are here to stay.

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