

PRESS F TO PAY RESPECTS TO THOSE WHO STILL THINKS VIDEO GAMES MEANS ISOLATION

Communities and Online Gaming

Christopher Tan

Abstract

As video games industries move at a rapid pace in terms of what games can offer, there has been an increased emphasis to take seriously the study of communities formed through online gaming. This conference paper aims to provide a pragmatic approach that communities formed within online gaming, can be advantageous, beneficial and genuine, countering against traditional studies that were sceptical to the rise of the digital age. This paper explores 3 very different kinds of gaming communities to reveal the validity of virtual gaming communities within different contexts. Utilising a variety of academic sources, which supports and counter-argues, this paper discovers that games are no longer as casual and simple as they seem, they are growing in complexity and will continue to draw serious discussions on its impact of people's lives and communities.

KEYWORDS: Online Gaming, Virtual Worlds, Traditional Games, Digital Games, Digitisation, Internet, Third place, MMORPG, Guilds, FIFA, GTA, Facebook, Farmville, Web 2.0, ARG.

Introduction

Old-fashioned games night consisting of *Uno*, *Monopoly* or *Scrabble* usually involved two or more players; some may refer to this as playing with a community of friends or family. Whereas the birth of digitisation that stems from old school arcade games such as *SpaceWar* in 1962 (Arpad, 2017), much more technologically advanced games today have often fall forefront of criticism that

communities are reduced to individualism or isolation from physical, face-to-face community. A major player to the digitisation of games is the introduction of the Internet during the 1990s (Andrews, 2013), where it's increased relevancy and functioning within video games provide a manicheistic belief, where one side of the argument suggests that with virtual spaces, we live in pseudo-communities (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, & David, 2004, p.323). This conference paper aims to discuss that video games have not destroyed communities; rather they have provided an alternate planet. Online gaming does not diminish personalities or communities but rather, provide life skills, extend physical communities and utilise collective intelligence to solve issues quicker.

MMORPG Provides Life Skills

“Third Place”

The introduction of digitisation saw the migration from traditional board games to video games and the emergence of virtual worlds, also known as the ‘third place’. ‘Third places’ in video games provide “a home away from home” and provided “feelings of being at ease” (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p.890, Table 1, row 8). With physicality, individuals move from the presence of others whilst in the “games room”, to individual seating and playing in front of a digital screen. Media scholars in the 2000’s often evoked scepticism towards this shift from physical to virtual communities, regarding it as a distortion to societal engagement, often known as the “bowling alone” theory (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p.885). However, the introduction of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing games (MMORPG) have given new meaning to gaming communities, offering as a alternate planet known as a “third place”, where individuals have the free will to enter and exit, unlike the real world bounded by various physical obligations (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p.890-891). In these alternate spaces, players utilise it as a form of “informal sociability”, similar to the functions of local pubs or cafes (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p.886). The “third

place” is incredibly important to study in relation to our youths, as explored in the next paragraph.

From Timid Youths to Future Leaders

A definition of a community can be understood in four elements, “a place to live, a spatial unit, a way of life and a social system” (Sanders 1996, cited in Katz et al. 2004, p.317). According to a paper by Meredith, Hussain, & Griffiths (2009), teenagers in their late years often make up the major population of MMORPG players. As youths enter into these virtual worlds, their reputation or societal statuses do not matter (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), more importantly, they have the freedom to express themselves, in which they may not have the confidence to in real life (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, p.558). Frostling-Henningsson (2009) supported this statement with a case study of a 15-year-old boy who is well-respected and lead groups of players in MMORPG. However, in real life, he has a poor relationship with his parents and low self-esteem due to weight-related issues. This example proves that friendships with strangers in online gaming communities can be a positive experience as the ‘third place’ offers a space unbounded by the unfavourable circumstances of real life, which in result hinders confidence growth. The success of the 15-year-old boy challenges the scepticism of the “bowling alone” theory, which suggested that with online spaces, there would be an increase in isolation. Instead, the boy developed self-confidence by nurturing other players, this is as Wellman & Gulia (1999, p.9) supports, “helping others can increase self-esteem, respect from others and status attainment”.

Rituals and Consequences

Much like real-world society and governments, virtual worlds also have policies and rules that keep players in check (Kovisto, 2003, p.1). In MMORPG, a guild is a community of players that help each other through utilising different abilities (Kovisto, 2003), as uniting for a common cause was of central importance (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, p.559). Within guilds, players can also own

houses that can serve both as a “personality” aspect and as a meeting place with other gamers (Kovisto, 2003, p.6). Guild houses in particular, are unique to this study as they provide a safe haven for members to store items that can be shared by others. Within this house, players can train together, hold meetings and also craft (Kovisto, 2003, p.6). Hierarchical ranking systems in guilds also provide structure for senior members to provide wisdom in terms of game knowledge, helping newer members and providing them with a sense of belonging (Kovisto, 2003, p.7). This reinforces communal values and encourages participatory culture, which as Jenkins (2010) supports; “members believe their contributions matter, feeling some degree of social connection with one another”. Guild houses in virtual worlds challenge traditional scholars such as Tonnies, as cited in Katz et al. (2004, p.322), who argued that with the arrival of technology, “natural basis of human life is swept away forever, alienating us from each other”. Simplicity and games can be said as a thing of the past as character complexity nowadays means games can offer high levels of character customisation. Besides appearance, external effects to a character have been increasingly realistic. In *Ultima Online* (UO), drinking (alcohol) holds realistic results on the character, as Kovisto (2003) describes with constant bloating and vomiting out of mana (magical energy). In open-world free-roaming games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Vice City in particular), exercising has massive effects on players such as training more on exercise bikes to increase stamina, swimming for an increase in lung capacity or weights to have a bigger build. These are the rules and consequences of real life transferred and paralleled into virtual gaming world values. An absence of any of these activities can result in lower gaming experience because much like the real world, the consequences of not exercising can be as simple as not being able to run from point A to B, quicker than one would like.

Common Interest and Social Games Can Extend Physical Communities

FIFA and GTA

In Wellman and Gulia's paper (1999, p.2), it explains that critics are often sceptical that the introduction of the Internet can be "meaningful or complete" and that it will lead people away from tangible face-to-face experiences. However, we should note that online games are generally controlled and played by humans and the feedback is occurring in real time (Klastrup, 2010, p.313). In common interest games such as *FIFA*, friends/football team members that play alongside each other in real-life teams can come together to do the same in a mode called 'pro clubs'. Players would come online at the same time, meeting up "virtually", playing in their usual football positions and working together via communicating through a party chat. This is an example of physical communities extending onto online communities, strengthening their ties. When individuals socialise more as Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, (2012) explains, familiarity with each other brings them closer in both offline and online environments, due to the growth and increase in similarities from conducting activities of interest. In *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), players can form new communities through forums based on common interests – one of the more popular ones, for example, is the car-meeting club. Within this virtual space, it becomes a "hallucination of the real", where players can "make possible" (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, p.557) by owning and modding expensive cars. Very often, this is unrealistic in life due to financial restraints; therefore GTA car clubs provide gamers "more experiences than real life could provide" (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, p.557) through the formation of these virtual communities, which never existed before. In this community, players often make new friends, learn new things and participate in an experience that is unfeasible in real life.

Virtual Friends are Valuable

Social networking sites (SNS) have been another context where digital games have been integrated into people's lives to maintain and create communities. Besides its popularity and relevancy over the past decade, Facebook has been utilising gaming companies to include social games. As these games require Internet connectivity, it creates and maintains relationships between friends and families (Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin, 2007, p.737). During Christmas 2009, *Farmville*, a Facebook game with 83 million active monthly users (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010), introduced a seasonal campaign where players could receive gifts from their Facebook friends, in which cannot be bought (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010, p.7). This encouraged a "reciprocation behaviour" (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010, p.7) where players had to send gifts but also reach out to their 'friend lists' to request for these gifts, the hope there will be an exchange. For those regular players with strong ties and/or friends that were already playing the game, they might post on their feed to receive these gifts. As humans are "inherently social creatures", with the "constant search of others to help share their interests and solve their problems" (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010, p.3), they have either strengthen existing ties in their 'friend lists' and/or created new friendships with strangers. Reaching out to strangers as an alternate solution to receive these gifts expands one's communal circle as Hjorth (2011) supports that SNS sites maintain but also establishes new links.

There Is No Problem That Collective Intelligence Cannot Solve

ARG: Potentialities of a bottom-up model

Traditionally in terms of politics and commercialisation, it is understood that a top-down process is instilled as higher authorities control what citizens receive. Likewise, with games, game developers often manufacture games that produce certain effects on consumers. Today, this has slowly diminished as game companies seek new ways to give consumers a say, encouraging their involvement with gameplay. This is Alternate Reality Games (ARG); it collates

geographically dispersed groups of people together via making use of Web 2.0 tools such as messaging apps/SNS, wikis, and forums to name a few. Initially, from an online space then onto a physical location, they come together and utilise their skills to shape a story (Kim, Lee, Thomas, & Dombrowski, 2009). Generally, ARG differs from video games, as many participants are unaware of the gaming aspects especially with the absence of playing in front of a machine and the existence of fixed rules/specific pathways to take. In ARGs, stories are disseminated into jigsaw-like parts, which participants must collate and assemble (Kim et al., 2009). As citizens come together with their 'jigsaw parts', they become the storyteller themselves and not the game developers, hence the bottom-up model. Completing the game is through the gathering of strangers and the applicability of each of their pieces, a process of collective intelligence. Through this newly formed community of strangers, they are all valuable members because they each have something that can advance the gaming narrative.

According to Marx and Engels (as cited in Katz et al., 2004), a greater detachment of physical peer-to-peer presence will lose all hope of community in society. This article by Katz et al. written in 2004 was also during a period where Web 2.0 emerged. General consensus during the birth of Web 2.0 was often sceptical, but the introduction of ARG to utilise Web 2.0 tools has challenged that. A bottom-up model in participatory and collective intelligence takes advantage of Web 2.0 to "expand their social network to improve their chances of solving the next puzzle" (Kim et al., 2009). As gaming elements such as the will and motivation to complete it, ARG's mentality in need for "stronger communities for the experience to be complete", (Kim et al., 2009) pushes players to diversify personalities and skill sets in order to accomplish the storyline quickly. This is evident in the ARG titled 'The Beast', where developers curated 3 months worth of problems, only for collective intelligence and participatory behaviours of players to solve it within a day (Kim et al., 2009). With Web 2.0 tools, geographically dispersed players around the globe were able to work

continuously and collectively, using various languages and specialities to come together, to accelerate solving the issue (Kim et al., 2009). As players reached out to different forms of players, they also created newer friendships and widened communities that would have been almost impossible to exist before Web 2.0 was introduced.

Conclusion and Discussions

In this conference paper, I have argued against traditional scholars and critics that the introduction of the Internet and more importantly its infiltration within gaming, have diminished interpersonal physical relationships and the values of community. Traditional studies often portray video games negatively, that youth's isolation playing MMORPG can be quite detrimental. MMORPG games, however, provide a "third place" for youths to take a break from real world problems (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009), a "keyboard café" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p.18) in which real-life identity do not hinder one's ability to lead a community of players. Secondly, a real-world footballing community of players can strengthen their communal ties by joining up on *FIFA's* pro clubs and stimulate the exact aspects of a real match, into the video game. Unachievable hobbies in real-life can also be achieved through games; *GTA's* car meets allow car enthusiasts to dedicate spending in-game money on mods and meet up with other enthusiasts, forming new communities that never existed before. Reciprocal games on SNS sites also stimulate behaviours of giving, a system that encourages users to give as much as possible in an attempt to receive back. To achieve this, players often quest outside their social circle for help, extending their communities to give to strangers too. Unlike hardcore MMORPG or common interest and social games, ARG is different because users are applying problem-solving efforts without the utility of stereotypical gaming components. There is a constant scepticism at the success of digital games in creating new communities through isolating an individual and the confinements in front of a

digital screen. However, ARG with the utilisation of technological tools and fundamentals of gaming narrative presents a different outlook to community formation as participants are forced to move from an online space to a physical mass. Regardless, all 3 contexts have proven to utilise gaming elements to form communities of real people.

There should be a push for future titles to encourage youths to take on leadership roles, which could have positive repercussions such as being leaders in the real world, transferring their skills of commanding teammates in party chats to real life command of co-workers.

Finally, an emphasis for games with a bottom-up approach should be significant moving forward; bottom-up games prove that problems can be solved with inclusivity, collective intelligence and an encouragement for participatory behaviours. As games were rather one-way previously due to its rather confined rules and storylines, bottom-up may be the way forward if these aspects can be transferred onto real-world situations, solving real-world problems.

References:

- Andrews, E. (2013). Who invented the Internet? Retrieved from: <https://www.history.com/news/who-invented-the-internet>
- Árpád, P. (2017). Technological Periods and Medial Paradigms of Computer Games. *Journal of Media Research*, 10(2), 52-67. DOI: 10.24193/jmr.28.4
- Baym, N., Zhang, Y., Kunkel, A., Ledbetter, A., & Lin, M. (2007). Relational Quality and Media Use in Interpersonal Relationships. *New Media & Society*, 9(5). DOI: 10.1177/1461444807080339
- Di Loreto, I., & Gouaich, A. (2010). Social Casual Games success is not so Casual. *Research Report #RR – 10017 LIRMM*, Universtiy of Montpellier – CNRS. Retrieved from: <https://hal-lirmm.ccsd.cnrs.fr/file/index/docid/486934/filename/FunAndGames2010-03-22.pdf>
- Frostling-Henningsson, M. (2009). First-Person Shooter Games as a Way of Connecting to people: “Brothers in Blood”. *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 12(5), 557-562. DOI: 10.1089/cpb.2008.0345
- Hjorth, L. (2011). *Games and Gaming: An Introduction to New Media: Web 2.0, Social Media and Online Games*. Retrieved from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/reader.action?docID=635418#>
- Jenkins, H. (2010). Why Participatory Culture Is Not Web 2.0: Some Basic Distinctions. Confessions of an Aca/Fan. Retrieved from: http://henryjenkins.org/2010/05/why_participatory_culture_is_n.html
- Katz, J., Rice, R., Acord, S., Dasgupta, K., & David, K. (2004). Personal Mediated Communication and the Concept of Community in Theory and Practice. In P. Kalbfleisch (Ed.), *Communication and Community: Communication Yearbook 28*. Retrieved from: <http://rrice.faculty.comm.ucsb.edu/A80KatzRiceAcordDasguptaDavid2004.pdf>
- Kim, J., Lee, E., Thomas, T., & Dombrowski, C. (2009). Storytelling in new media: The case of alternate reality games, 2001-2009. *First Monday*, 4(6). Retrieved from: <https://www.firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2484/2199>

- Klastrup, L. (2010). *International handbook of internet research: Understanding Online (Game)worlds*. Retrieved from:
<https://link.library.curtin.edu.au/ereserve/DC60267025/0?display=1>
- Kovisto, E. (2003). *Supporting Communities in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games by Game Design*. Paper presented at the Digital Games Research Association Conference. Retrieved from:
<http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05150.48442.pdf>
- Meredith, A., Hussain, Z., & Griffiths, M. (2009). Online gaming: a scoping study of massively multi-player online role playing games. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 9(1-2), 3-26. DOI: 10.1007/s10660-009-9029-1
- Steinkuehler, C., & Williams, D. (2006). Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as “Third Places”. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 11(4), 885-909. Retrieved from:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00300.x>
- Trepte, S., Reinecke, L., & Juechems, K. (2012). The social side of gaming: How playing online computer games creates online and offline social support. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 28, 832-839. DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2011.12.003
- Wellman, B., & Gulia, M. (1999). Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities. In P. Kollock, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Communities and Cyberspace*. Retrieved from:
<http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/netlab/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Net-Surfers-Dont-Ride-Alone-Virtual-Community-as-Community.pdf>