

# *The Impact of Online Gaming Society to Individuals' Interaction and Offline Relationship Development*

**In Communities and Online Gaming**

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**Abstract:**

In the modern era, technology has become so advanced that it lets people interact with others around the world without having to physically be there with them. Communities are no longer limited to nearby neighborhoods and physical interactions. This paper will explore the community that is formed through the online gaming community. When it comes to the word “gaming”, people often think that it is a word associated with laziness and being an anti-social. However, this essay will uncover the social side of the gaming community and how it is beneficial for many people, especially those who are not good with real-life face-to-face interactions. Finally, interactions within online space are not limited to gaming, but romantic development as well.

**Keywords:**

Community, Online Game, Social Interaction, Communication, Identity, Anonymity, Avatar, Deception, The Third Place.

## **Introduction:**

In the modern digital era, communities are not limited through neighborhood, school, and workplace. The derives of technology and internet advance has allowed people to communicate through online interaction, online games community included. People can now meet others who share the same interests with them through online space. Online multiplayer games are starting to take over the world of gaming, because of its unique features and fun interaction. Many people thought that gaming is a waste of time and purely an escape from the real world, but there are benefits in its community that people are yet to realize. This essay will uncover the reason why online multiplayer games are taking the world by storm, particularly on its effect on players' interaction, self-esteem, and how it would result in an offline relationship.

## **What is A Community?**

To start with, a community can be defined as a small environment with social norms. People who live within a community share real and meaningful relationship when compared to society with many people that they do not connect with (Katz et al, 2004, p.322). Wellman and Gulia (1999) stated that communities are not limited to people living in the same neighborhood, but it could also exist as a social network with different people who shares a common interest, even though they are miles away (p.2). Throughout the decades, the internet has come to an age with many advantages which include the development of Web 2.0. It is a hybrid between communication and technological service. Its services allow users to interact with people throughout the world, without having the need to travel. Proper technology and internet connection are needed in order to use features of Web 2.0. It creates communities within online space (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007, p.53).

Online communities can be defined as a virtual social space within computer networks that allows the user to communicate with a range of people across the globe regardless of their physical location, at any time (Wellman & Gulia, 1997, p.1). In a sense, its online presence provides user higher emotional comfort than physical community because how users could find and connect with strangers in a similar situation

as them (p.7). Oldernberg (as stated in Ponsford, 2016, p.15) suggested the “Third Place” define a social space that is separated from home and work environment. It acts as a neutral ground that gives the member a sense of freedom. People can visit the place anytime they want because it is easily accessible. Here, everyone is seen and treated equally as they disregard any status (p.16). In gamers term, the “Third Place” suggests a player’s interaction with other gamers inside the “online gaming space”. Not limited to playing games, players are able to discuss other interests and possible offer emotional support to one another in this informal “hangout” place (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p.886).

### **Online Games:**

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing-Games (MMORPG) is an online games platform that allows millions of people to gather together and play with or against each other in a real-time basis (Pussman, 2015, p.4). As the name suggests, players’ interaction with one another is a very important aspect throughout the game. To play in a multiplayer game, one needs to communicate with one another and cooperation. MMORPG’s features allow people to create and join a guild for better game experiences. Through guilds, players are encouraged to communicate with each other, thus increasing the quality of social interaction within the game. Although with a limited number of members, the guild allows its members to interact with the same group of people every time the player logs in (p.4). The more they play together, players will eventually form meaningful bonds with each other (Ponsford, 2015, p.17). Furthermore, its feature notified players when people in their friend list are online. This makes it easy for players to communicate with friends without having to check their attendance every time.

Many believe that people who spend time playing games and sit in front of their computer for a long time is often considered as being lazy and unproductive because instead of working and communicating with others around, gamers just sit and play. They are considered anti-social who does not like to communicate with other people. Some might even forget time and responsibilities, instead of being social, they became addicts. This often misguides others to judge them because they think that these gamers are shutting down themselves from society and real-life situation (Kaye et al., p.221).

However, there are always reasons behind an action. Here, one must consider the reasons why people like to indulge themselves within games, particularly online multiplayer games. Yee (as stated in Stiles, 2010, p.15) believes that one of the primary motivations that lead people to play online game is its social component. Players seek to socialize through games, work together and form a long-lasting bond that they might consider stronger than real-life friends.

### **Why Virtual Community?**

Previous research studies found that there is a positive increase in players' social identity. Kaye et al., found that online game communities help promote ones' ability to communicate with other players through its features (Kaye et al., p.221). Some players may have difficulties in communicating when they are required to make face-to-face interactions. Ng and Wiemer (as stated in Pussman, 2015, p.5) believe that people who are socially awkward prefer to spend their effort to communicate through online games instead. It is suggested that online world is highly beneficial for shy and introverted people because the anonymous feature that it provides feel less real and intense when compared to the real-life face-to-face interaction (Whitty & Buchanan, 2009, p.68). To some people, it is a challenge for them to open up and communicate through a face-to-face situation. Thus, explains why they might prefer to join the online community. Though not everyone, it is important to consider those who are socially awkward, because this interaction would mean that these people still have a network to connect with, and the people they meet are not limited by geographical location (Ponsford, 2015, p.1). Hence, the previous believes that claims gamer shuts doors to society is not entirely true, because gamers have their own "real" virtual community.

Although there are reports that suggest their level of addiction to the game are relatively higher than those who do not spend too much time behind games, it is shown that gamers who previously have depression or low self-esteem, found refugees within online games. The needs of social contact are then filled through online communications with their online peers. Cole and Griffiths (as stated in Stiles, 2010, p.10) stated that because of its highly interactive environment nature, MMORPG games allow players to create a strong bond amongst others. Because players interact with other players daily

and help each other accomplish missions, teamwork. Players are dependent on each other in MMORPG because the game missions require certain skills and knowledge, which players may possess and others not. Its chat and voice channel allow players to easily interact with others regardless of their current locations (Stiles, 2010, p.11).

### **Gamers and Identity:**

Acting behind computer screens help hide ones' real identity, allowing them to freely express themselves with no fear of rejection. Not only anonymous, but players also gain control to take in any name and personalities to conceal their true self (Donath, 1999, p.2). Players' identity is fully hidden through game avatar and second "identity" within the game. Unless disclose by its user, there is no chance of others knowing players' real identity. Every user is equipped with an avatar of their choice. An "Avatar" is an animated character that can be freely customized by its user. Its features include physical appearances such as facial expression, age, race, gender, voice, and clothing (Pussman, 2015, p.4). These Avatars creates anonymity, allowing players to play without having to worry about how others might judge them. Behind every Avatar, it could be anyone.

As their identity is concealed, it is easier for them to handle rejection because even with rejection, players are relieved because their identity is still hidden (Whitty & Buchanan, 2009, p.65). People who judge them are not able to attack them in real life, and they do not need to feel embarrassed or hide their face afterward. Goffman suggested a theory of impression management, where one can manage the impression that they give. Its front part talks about the manner on how people express themselves in everyday life, how they wanted to be seen by others. It can be considered as a mask to conceal their identity. Backstage part, however, refers to their real self which only certain people know of (Goffman, 1959, p.53). In the world of games, Avatar can be considered as their "front" part, because it conceals their identity. While the gamers behind the computer screen are in "backstage" because they control what can be revealed and what is not to be.

Anonymity is an important aspect that draws people into playing online games because it is a safe haven for players who does not want others knowing their identity.

Here, they can explore a range of new “identities” that they never had the chance to have in their real-life. They could be a normal person who follows orders as their backstage, but they could also be a leader who leads the guild in the game. Through their research, Lee et al., (2018) confirm that there is a positive effect of virtual online games in increasing players’ leadership skills through game achievements (p.557). Some consider this online achievement to be something that can be applied to something similar in real-life (p.571). As player continue to play in teamwork, they will develop cognitive behavior which would allow them to apply these leadership skills in a real-life situation, because it enables them to cooperate and learn from one another. Lee et al., (2018) believe that the development of players’ online leadership skill will elevate players’ identification of themselves because it will help increase their self-esteem (p.571).

### **Risks?**

Moreover, due to the anonymity, the risks of unpleasant interaction in online games can be avoided. Online interactions eliminate the uncomfortable feeling when the conversation enters a long pause, or if it ended. Communicating online allows people to slowly decide what kind of information should they reveal to the other party, and how would they present it. (Whitty & Buchanan, 2009, p.65). However, some argue that anonymity is equal to identity deception because these identities are fake. One of the keys to communication is to know the identity of the other party, by building trust, one can get to know another better. It is essential for understanding and evaluating the purpose of the interaction, and to avoid miscommunication (Donath, 1999, p.5). But, as one’s identity is hidden, people would not know the true motivation behind the mask. Here, it would be hard to distinguish if an individual is lying because they will try to appear the best version as they could possibly be. At the wrong hand, a great cost would follow the “deceived” person. Again, as Avatar promotes anonymity, no one will know the real identity of the other players unless the player chooses to reveal his or her true identity (Pussman, 2015, p.4). Thus, players understand the risks and are prepared for this possible deception as they stepped into the online gaming community.

### **Taking It A Little Bit Further:**

As players become comfortable with their online friends, they are more likely to reveal their real identity to those who they trust are worthy of the information, compared to the amount of information they will reveal when it is face-to-face interaction. The friendship that these players created within an online space can be stronger than the ones made through the real-life environment. To some people, this friendship might eventually lead to an offline face-to-face interaction (Stiles, 2010, p.11). Based on research conducted by Parks and Roberts in 1998 (as stated in Stiles, 2010, p.16), it was found that most of the relationships that are formed through online interactions are those from the opposite sex. Meanwhile, same-sex relationships are more commonly found throughout ones' entire lifetime in an offline environment. This suggests that many of this relationship have high potential to develop further into a romantic relationship. Through the comfort of online communication, players are able to raise the self-confidence, allowing them to pursue a possible romantic relationship through online games. Based on research conducted by Cole & Griffiths in 2007, the result suggests that as players spend many hours playing an online game together, their bond will grow strong which leads to real-life relationships (Stiles, 2010, p.4). Additionally, Park and Roberts (as stated in Stiles, 2010, p.16) believe that when developing an online romantic relationship, individuals are less constraint by their friends and family because little to no people are aware of the relationship itself. Perhaps because the interactions itself happens through online context and no one notices anything particularly different, as there is no physical date.

As mentioned before, through the online context, individuals are more relaxed in terms of how they can express themselves. Individuals have more control over what information should be disclosed and what should not. It is suggested that online interaction allows shy individuals to gain confidence in flirting, as they do not need to worry about any awkward rebound (Whitty & Buchanan, 2009, p.65). However, research shows that as players become immerse in online interaction, higher risks of withdrawing from the offline relationship is seen. Here, it would be hard for players to leave the world of online interaction because they have become addicted to the "safety" feeling they received through online games (Stiles, 2010, p.14). Players comfortable with their current situation and social interaction through online games, that they do not wish to leave their

comfort zone as they believe that their online interaction is equal to normal offline interactions. However, although players will gain more friends online, they will experience a higher level of loneliness when they are not playing. Players might not notice the feeling as they play, but when they do nothing, they will feel it.

### **Conclusion:**

Community is an integral part of ones' daily life because it fulfills the needs of human interaction with one another. Although not everyone has the advantage of social confidence in face-to-face interactions, many are given opportunities to interact with others who share common interests through the online game community. Through the world of online games, players are able to meet a vast number of players from different gender, age, race and ethnicity, and countries. While some argue that gamers are anti-social and outcast, they, in fact, have many friends whom they can connect with better, compared to when forced to communicate with those who they do not connect. Through anonymous interaction, players are able to express themselves more freely without having to fear any rejection. Furthermore, as they grow fond of each other, some might consider meeting in real-life, although with risks calculated. In time, the friendship that some have harness will grow to a romantic relationship.



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