

## **Social Media, Communities and Networks – NETS5015**

### **Conference paper**

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***Gaming communities and networks enhance the experiences of members and often form the backbone of the games themselves.***

#### **Abstract**

*Gaming communities are an integral part of the gaming landscape both online and offline. Thus, being a part of a gaming community directly influences and enhances the experience of a member through relationships and social capital. This conference paper will use literature based primarily on massively-multiplayer online games (MMOG's) to explore the benefits of community-based gaming from both a player and developer perspective whilst examining their symbiotic relationship.*

**Keywords: Community, Social Capital, Massively-Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG), Video Games.**

#### **Introduction**

Playing video games is an inherently social experience. Whether experienced in a single or multiplayer context, it matters not. Video gaming is continuously evolving, and social interaction is an important motive for players (Ruggles, Wadley, & Gibbs, 2005). Thus, the virtual community has become the zenith for gaming interaction. Virtual communities are characterized by the shared goals and interests of people who use electronic communication as a primary form of interaction. Additionally, as people of similar interests engage with one another for long enough periods of time with significant feeling, personal relationships are formed within cyberspace (Ridings & Gefen, 2006). In the context of gaming, Ruggles et al. (2005) explain that video game developers have taken advantage of the internet to connect players both in and out of game. Whether it be to discuss ideas, share resources or play together, the community is based on these foundations, which when strong enough can bleed into the offline world through events such as Blizzcon. A

convention run by Blizzard Entertainment which focuses on bringing together the games they have created with the communities they have cultivated. This paper aims to explore how gaming communities and networks enhance the experiences of members and often form the backbone of games themselves once established and will primarily draw on literature referencing massively multiplayer online games / massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMOGs/MMORPGs). The following paragraph will outline how developers work to foster communities in their games while the subsequent paragraphs will focus on how player experiences are enhanced through social capital and learning. Additionally, this paper will explore how the developer is an integral part of the community and how the symbiotic player-developer relationship provides benefits. Lastly this paper will explore how communities, once established, form the backbone of video games through examination of mediums such as Twitch.

### **Virtual Beginnings**

While community is important, the genesis lies with the development staff. It was found through interviews with producers, developers and designers from five successful game vendors that had successfully shipped single-player, multi-player and massively-multiplayer games, that an online community is considered important to the success of games by all participants (Ruggles et al. 2005). Furthermore, various techniques are employed by developers both in-game and out-of-game to facilitate the formation of communities. In-game techniques are comprised of supporting formation of player organizations (guilds, clans etc.), encouragement of player competition (competition requires players to interact with one another), design of effective player matching systems (often through a user interface (UI) that allows customization of preferences in content, activities, social groups), effective player-to-player communication tools as well as the design of social spaces in game that can facilitate things such as trade and community events (Ruggles et al. 2005). Out-of-game techniques are then comprised of the provision of official websites and forums, support and encouragement of fan sites, effective interaction between development staff and players, involving players in decisions and encouraging high profile players to become advocates for the game and community (Ruggles et al. 2005). These techniques allow players to create communities through the given tools and design choices of the

development staff which as they grow, allow players to have a better experience while playing the game. This will be covered in the proceeding paragraphs.

### **Motivations in Play**

Millions of people play games, and among these players, each have their own motivations. In a study of World of Warcraft (WoW), a popular MMORPG developed by Blizzard Entertainment, 1059 participants answered questions regarding the reasons in which they play the game. Answers included player versus environment (PvE) content, exploration, quest achievements, player versus player (PvP) content, dungeons and raids (Billieux et al., 2013). MMORPG's are described to be intensely competitive, and players often may not be able to survive alone. Hence the need for players to cooperate and rely on each other in order to achieve a common goal. This forming of groups, and intergroup collaboration is what gives rise to robust communities in which players create and transact these online relationships both in-game through avatars and out of game through voice chat, instant messaging, forums and email (Bessiere, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007). It is this formation of community that enhances the experience of the player. With in-game content often being designed and balanced around multiple players, having a community to tap into affords community members the means to overcome these obstacles and achieve goals they otherwise would be unable to reach on their own. This is exemplified through the in-game social networks known as guilds. These are communities of players who band together with the goals of making friends, accessing guild resources and accessing help and knowledge from more experienced players. Additionally, the positive connotations related to guilds often denote that players participate in this form of engagement voluntarily resulting in individual goals becoming shared goals (Hsiao & Chiou, 2012).

### **Social Capital**

Additionally, social capital plays an integral role in the experience of players both in-game and out-of-game. In a study of 161 people by Martoncik and Lokska (2016), it was found that players experience lower degrees of loneliness and social anxiety when playing with community members in which they have relationships with. This was associated with guild membership and frequent communication with teammates over voice chat. In addition to this, online game community engagement out-of-game can be motivated by meeting new

people, information gathering and learning, social interaction, social support, sense of community, external support and alleviation of social anxiety through the content sharing platform Twitch.tv (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018).

An additional study of 22 participants explains that they all feel a sense of community and belonging in relation to WoW. This community aspect was noted to be one of the best things about the game and may have provided them with belonging that they lacked in their offline lives (O'Connor et al., 2015). Furthermore, this study examined that of the participants, many of them saw WoW and MMO's as a medium in which they could assume identities that fit with the communities in which they were members. These included; the WoW player, the MMO player, the gamer and the guild member. Additionally, these players also reported trusting guildmates, giving and receiving in-game help and advice as well as giving and receiving offline advice (O'Connor et al., 2015). While membership to groups in the community assists in enhancing players capacity to tackle in-game tasks, the formation of relationships and acquisition of social capital examined in these studies illustrates how the experience of community members is enhanced through providing a support network of new relationships in addition to the positive influence on their mental health, resulting in more enjoyable playtime and environment. Furthermore, while in-game connection is important, out-of-game connections are equally as important in building and assisting members of the community. Collaboration via Twitch.tv allows community members to enhance their skillset and knowledge base via consumption of content produced by other community members. In addition to this, regarding other game types, it is often not necessary to be connected to the internet to play a single-player game, this does not mean community membership is a null factor in this scenario. While player-to-player interaction is limited in game, online tutorials, tips and hints are all beneficial in helping the player fully realize their experience (Ruggles et al., 2005). This illustrates how despite not having in-game interactions with other plays in other genres of games, it is possible to enhance your experience and be an active member of the community by examining and taking part in the conversation around said game.

### **Developer Perspective**

Until now, this paper has largely focused on how community membership and engagement enhance the experiences of the player. This paragraph will examine this topic through the lens of the developer. Earlier in this paper, it was noted that members from various video game vendors considered the online community to be a contributing factor to a game's success. In addition to this, online communities based around the use of a product can be important for developing new marketing strategies resulting in reinforcing the customers relationship to the product (Ruggles et al., 2005). That is, a thriving community allows for the developer to employ additional monetization strategies. Furthermore, the more engaged a player is with the community, as seen in the previous paragraph where it was indicated that the community was the best part of the game for some people, the more likely a community member is to stick with the product. As well as this, it is important to note that the developer and the players form a symbiotic relationship. With the developers taking on feedback from the community in order to try and improve the game, which will work to further grow the community as the game evolves. A perfect example of this is Blizzard Entertainment's WoW question and answer livestreams which aim to address player feedback and ensure players that they have been heard. That they are a part of the process.

## **Community**

Once a community exists, it often becomes the backbone of the game. As without a community the game would likely not exist. The WoW documentary *Looking for Group* (2014) illustrates this as much of it features community members. Many of which explain that they continuously come back to the game for the community as it makes them feel welcome, it supports them, and it is part of their identity. Simultaneously, developers comment on the players being integral to the game. Bungie also illustrates this idea through their "This Week at Bungie" (TWAB) blog which communicates weekly changes to the community whilst also featuring user generated content each week. Thus, facilitating collaboration in an online setting out-of-game. While this paragraph is light on literature, it offers real world examples as to what kind of role the community plays in a gaming context. The WoW Twitch channel for example has approximately 538,000 followers while the community member Preach has approximately 136,000. Demonstrating that even as an individual he has a large amount of pull. Additionally, the WoW YouTube channel has 1.2

million subscribers while Preach and Bellulargaming, another WoW community member, have a combined 847,000 subscribers. While the developers maintain the game, content creators and community members contribute largely to the knowledge and skill base of the community due to everyday broadcasting and publishing of user generated content that aims to provide value to community members, whilst providing feedback to Blizzard.

## **Conclusion**

Whether a game is single-player or multiplayer, there will always be a community element. That community element may range from guides and tips for a single-player game to new relationships made in-game or through forums. There are numerous ways that communities interact in the gaming context and it requires effort from both the developers and the players in order to foster a community that can truly enhance the experiences of everyone involved. In the case of WoW which has been briefly examined in this paper, it is the community that increases the capacity of the player to achieve greater goals but more importantly, it is the community that increases the social capital of community members allowing them to enhance their experience through a betterment of their health, identity and other social issues whilst creating an environment in which others are encouraged to join. Although it is necessary for a game to exist in which the community can orbit, the game could not continue to thrive without the community to nourish it.

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