Communities and Online Games

Online game platforms provide a space for culturally and

geographically diverse communities

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It is quite possible to become overwhelmed by the amount of research and theory focussed on community. However, for the following, the research has been limited to focusing on research conducted in the field of communities within the space of online games. Offline, a community could be defined as a group of people with commonalities that spend mutual and voluntary time together for a purpose. Communities can be categorised in many ways including religious, political, cultural, sports, knowledge and hobbies. However, for the purpose of this paper, the historical element of community that will be drawn upon is location. Location was chosen to distinguish the difference between local communities and online communities. It is important to discuss offline communities in conjunction with online communities to be able to demonstrate the differences and similarities between the two. Some of their core values of both forms of community are similar including their reason for remaining in the communities and the bonds and friendships they create with other members. This paper will examine the online gaming community and the platform provided by online games for likeminded people to create geographic and culturally diverse communities. The following argues that online communities are broken into groups based on the types of games they play or by the actual games they play. Compared to offline communities, that may be categorised by location or religious belief, for example, online gamers join, and are accepted into their relative communities because they are active players of specific games. Race, religion and location have little baring on acceptance in the online gaming communities. To start off, the focus will begin on offline communities to set the scene of what traditional offline communities encompass and eventually demonstrate how online communities allow for more culturally diverse and geographically dispersed members.

Some people in our world today remember the time before the internet and online communities. Perhaps they were active members of their neighbourhood community. Maybe they were friends with children from the local area and got together on the weekends and played games outside. Maybe as they got older they were involved in local working-bees to help the needy or aged in the community. Perhaps, they not only grew up in the area but also chose to raise their children there too, creating a new generation of community. These people did not have the internet to facilitate the making of new friends or communities. They were limited to their location and only broadened their reach if they physically moved around. If they did move from one location to another, new bonds could be created and old ones may fade if not regularly maintained. Delanty (2009) describes this type of traditional American community as:

> … community was seen as pertaining to relatively small groups, such as neighborhoods, based on mutual interdependence and common forms of life. These communities might be quite small, perhaps extending over a few blocks, but were held to be the foundation for a sense of belonging based on shared experiences, a common language and kinship ties and, above all, a sense of inhabiting a common spatial lifeworld. The forms of social control exercised in these neighborhoods tended to enhance community rather than undermine it. (Delanty, 2009 pg 41)

Neighborhoods and mutual locations helped form communities however in the current world of instant internet, social media and online games the limitations of geography is no longer.

Just like traditional neighborhood communities, online communities are filled with people with a common purpose. Online communities were once considered a 'social phenomenon' during the beginnings of the Internet (Staneoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001) but are now a part of many people's daily lives. There are many typologies of online communities and there is still research to be done on this subject however four types of online communities have been identified by the research undertaken by Staneoevska-Slabeva and Schmid (2001). These communities include: communities that encourage and facilitate discussion on a specific topic; communities that have a common task or goal they want to achieve via working together; communities that have virtual settings such as in a game; and communities that do not easily comply with the previous three examples (Ibid).

For the purpose of this paper, communities that have virtual settings for games will be the focus. However, it must be noted that the top two communities regarding discussion and achieving goals have strong ties with the virtual settings communities as will be discussed below.

Online game communities, are groupings of geographically and culturally diverse people who play particular online games with each other. Calculable studies demonstrate demographics of online gamers as approximately 88% male with an age range of 25 to 28 years old (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, pp. 558). The motivation for gamers to create these online communities is their want for socialisation, connection, collaboration and competition with other likeminded people who play the same game as them (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2004). The players can play their games together as teams or pairs but they do not have to be geographically located in the same area. The key factor to online game communities is communication by way of voice or typed discussions. Chat channels inside some online games provide a mechanism for people to communicate with their preferred gamer buddies (Koivisto, 2003). Conversations can revolve around gameplay and/or personal circumstances. Examples of these types of conversations will be detailed further on. Due to the geographic diverseness of some game communities, conversations can either be asynchronous or synchronous (ibid.). Some gamers even attribute their persistence in playing online games because they have built friendships within the online community (ibid).

Acceptance, support and social interaction are important humanised pieces that make up the puzzle of communities. People who play online games and engage in their respective online communities want these same human elements. In two studies undertaken by Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), they examined massively multiplayer online games (MMO's) for their method and role in engaging players on a social level. They examined two online MMO's, *Asheron's Call I* and *II* and *Linage I* and *II* in two separate projects (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 887-888). Combined, the studies incorporated the following means of data collection: surveys, experimental design, observation, cognitive ethnography, digital screenshots of images and conversations, recorded and transcribed conversations, interviews and players playing from city and remote locations (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 887-888). Their research demonstrated that MMO's provide a space

for communities or "third places", their description of online communities, (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp.888). Such communities differ from traditional communities in terms of geographic diversity

Neutral places are seen as spaces that are free from prejudice. The first characteristic found during the study was "Neutral Ground" (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 890). This means that "individuals can enter and leave" the game when they want "without having to ask permission", and are under "no default obligation to play" (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 890). Players have a choice to play games and return to the space on their own accord. If the game or the communities associated with the game are not favourable for the player, the play has no reason to come back to the space. This leads into the next characteristic which builds upon "Neutral Ground" and explores the levelling the status of people who play games.

In online games, a person can be whomever they want to be. Your avatar could be female with pink hair, cowboy boots and a proclivity for clubbing opponents to death but in real life you are a male investment banker with three kids. The Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) studies raised a characteristic called "Leveler" whereby entering the game releases the player of any and all real-world status (2006, pp.891). Location, age, gender, race, rank and religion have no bearing on the avatar. The players create their individual avatar identity and start their game journey from the bottom like everyone else. There are social rankings within the game worlds but only due to player participation and subsequent progress within the game (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 892). Potentially, players who are high up in their rankings within the game could be far younger, possibly teen age, than their subordinates. Frostling-Henningsson (2009), use the example of a teenage boy's online avatar "is well respected; he has a good reputation. In real life, he is a teenager with low self-esteem". In addition to social status, the levelling characteristic also encompassed players willingly supplying advice and assistance to other players without asking questions or judging the avatar (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 892). The game platform takes away any personal face to face contact that could potentially put-off a person from helping another, making it easier and less confronting to provide assistance.

Communication is a fundamental key for online communities. To be able to establish and maintain online relationships, communication takes place in many varieties that either

involve text or voice. "Conversation is the main activity" is another key characteristic the scholars established during their research (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp.892). Chats can take place privately, publicly and in groups (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp.893). This study demonstrated "through the myriad [of] chat channels is not only necessary to navigate the virtual world's diverse challenges…but is the very fodder from which individuals create and maintain relationships of status and solidarity…" (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 893). Building on this, Domahini et al (2014) conducted a study which provided results on what level online gamers rate the friendships they have created while playing online games. Some of the results are 55% of the research group said they have "gaming related friends" with a mean of 9.6 (Domahidi et al, 2014, pp.112). This demonstrates that communication plays a big role in online games thus to be able to form friendships.

In relation to friendships and relationships that are built across large geographic spreads, recent data was difficult to find. However, a 2013 distribution of MMO gamers worldwide by Statista (Statista, 2013) resulted in; 282 million in Asia pacific; 208 million in Europe, the Middle East and Africa; 79 million in North America and 59 million in Latin America.

One could make a reasonable guess that these numbers have increased since 2013 due to the ubiquitous nature of smart phones worldwide and ability to access free online games. Therefore, the chances to make new relationships with people across the globe has increased and will continue to increase as new games emerge and new gamers come on-board.

Communities are groups of people who engage with each other and generally have at least one thing in common. For example, this might be location, religion, race, gender, hobby or ideal. Online communities are built on the same premise however their means of communicating is online. People who play online games often become engaged in online communities surrounding games they play. Research has shown that people from all over the world engage with each other in these online game communities and sometimes create true friendships or relationships. These friendships cross visual, in the flesh, boundaries because there is no face to face element when playing online games. Online games create level playing fields for people of any persuasion to jump into the game and give it a go without judgement on their personal or professional status outside of the game. The

hierarchy of the players within online games does occur. However, unlike the 'real' world a 14 year old girl could have subordinates of 45 year old males. Ultimately, communication is the key to developing and maintaining online game relationships but no matter who you are or where you come from, online games provide a platform for everyone to engage and participate.

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