

The Battle for Cohesion - Toxicity Between Warriors

Abstract

This paper investigates how anonymity and pseudonymity affect online gaming spheres, especially in competitive gaming. The approach includes an investigation of gaming history and technologies that allow people to socialise, then compares initial online gaming communities to modern communities to show that the large amount of growth and relative ease of adopting identities online, coupled with the lack of personal accountability encourages toxicity and adversity.

The ability to adopt an anonymous or pseudonymous identity online via mediated spaces or “third places” (Oldenburg, 1999) has enabled Internet users to present numerous presentations of the self (Goffman, 1978) in communities, regardless of racial, social, economic, political and cultural circumstances. In the context of online gaming, Web 2.0 technologies have facilitated places of competition, relaxation and creativity, using different methods of communication (voice, text chat, avatars etc.) to communicate oneself to others. However, some interactions are exclusionary in nature, leading to toxicity or adversity between players. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the impacts anonymity and pseudonymity have on communities, including the division between “power gamers” and “casuals”, and how that affects the formation of gaming communities. The ease of adopting an anonymous or pseudonymous identity for gaming in a third place can foster unhealthy interactions and relationships between gamers, creating systems of power between elite and casual gamers, as well as themes of toxicity and adversity between individuals.

Brief history of Web 2.0, community mechanics

Web 2.0 communities grew from a mixture of a homebrew movement in the 80s (Wasserman & Stryker, 1980), and people-centric collaboration in the 90s (Usenet, blogs etc.), based on the foundation of prior military and academic research. Anyone with Internet access could publish rather than consume, engaging with content on numerous topics regardless of geographical proximity or technical skill given the increasingly user-friendly implementations found in blogs and newsgroups (Blood, 2000).

Part of the attraction of Web 2.0 is the idea of identity performances or explorations without actually being identified thanks to the way individuals can present themselves freely and anonymously online. Suddenly, people who had been used to the lifestyle of *Gemeinschaft* (small, close-knit communities where everyone is familiar with each other and abided by a set of morals and values) adopted aspects of *Gesellschaft* (communities where people could form relationships based purely on some needs contract with others (Tönnies, 1957)), broaching topics considered taboo and possibly illegal in a relatively safe space. Communities of every type began to spring up, many of which catered to individuals looking to coexist and either cooperate or compete in a virtual world in a playful manner.

To define video game communities it is worth considering some of the earliest online video games for a specific epoch from which we can observe the growth of virtual worlds, while at the same time examining the effects that numerous forms and evolutions of communication technologies had on the formation of communities. From this point of reference we can then incorporate the development and characteristics of “third places”, allowing individuals to come together to relax, socialise and possibly compete in simulations of simulacra; virtual worlds constructed from objects that have little-to-no reference to real-world constructs (Baudrillard, 1995).

Following on from third places we can explore the shifting of boundaries generated by new media and what drives people to socialise via these media, the concepts of social capital and weak ties, as well as the exclusionary behaviours exhibited by some in order to create divisions of power, e.g. between “power gamers”, people who form elitist structures within the gaming community, and “casual gamers”, people who generally don’t take gaming too seriously (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010). Connecting all of these themes together are the topics of anonymity and pseudonymity, and how they have enabled individuals and groups to incite anger, frustration and sadness within various virtual worlds by using false or misleading reusable identities, leading to toxic environments where adversity between players challenges the idea of several of Oldenburg’s characteristics central to maintaining third places.

A short history of gaming

Huizinga notes that the areas in which game play is constructed occurs within a “magic circle”; a limited, temporal space within which a performance or performances occur as an act apart from the real world, where individuals share the feeling of being apart together in absence of the usual worldly norms while socialising (Huizinga, 1949). While Huizinga references classic games such as chess and the more traditional clubs that form around them, the constructs of sharing social aspects together in a play space has been extended and enhanced with the advent of various networking and Web 2.0 technologies.

Key to the simulation of virtual worlds where multiple people could interact and socialise were two titles: *Maze* and *Spasim* (both 1973). The titles were based on the efforts of students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Stanford University, utilising the networking technology of ARPANET and PLATO, both predecessors to the Internet (Moss, 2016). *Maze* allowed up to eight players to engage each other in the genre known as First-Person Shooter (FPS), where the player fights other players (or computer-generated and controlled robots or “bots”) to complete objectives and score points. *Spasim* allowed up to thirty-two players to engage each other in space combat, and, together with *Maze*, the two titles introduced platforms upon which many people could experience performances that were impossible in real life; a perfect example of Baudrillard’s “hallucination of the real” (Baudrillard, 1995).

One of the most famous examples that would drive the innovation behind online gaming and socialising was *Zork*, a single-player role-playing game (RPG) written by a group of MIT students in 1977 (Anderson, 2009). *Zork* put players in the shoes of an unnamed adventurer

who delves into dungeons filled with treasure and all manner of creatures. It was from this that Roy Trubshaw, a student from the University of Essex, developed the first Multi-User Dungeon or MUD, running on a British academic network known as JANET (Bartle, 1990). MUD1 as it came to be known (Mulligan & Patrovsky, 2003), allowed individuals on the network to chat via text input anonymously or with a pseudonym in various spaces and explore the simulation of various environments, generating a third place by bringing together arguably all of Oldenburg's characteristics (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009).

While text chat did allow for basic communication, it did not allow for a full range of social cues to be realised, thus limiting interactions to a primitive state. With the introduction of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) in 1995 (Krane, 2017), Internet users were able to communicate using Web 2.0 technologies and chat vocally, vastly increasing the range of social cues available which greatly improved how people formed interpersonal connections online and thus how they express and develop their identity in a gaming community (Williams et al., 2007). Advents such as avatars (simulated entities representing the player or user) allowed individuals to express extensions of the self or specific performances of their identity further, either somewhat-accurately about their real-life person, or as an anonymous construct.

Weak ties, strong ties and social capital

The development of one's identity relies on the strength of one's connections to other people and the accumulation of social capital; a wealth similar to financial capital that is gathered in order to generate a reputation or visibility, amongst other aspects (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007). These connections, known as ties, are either strong (close family and friends) or weak (more distant relationships, e.g. friends of friends). While strong ties generally lend more reliable support, weak ties allow for more possibilities of variance in relationships, opening potential gateways to new opportunities. In terms of gaming, having a large friends list gives you more people to play, trade and communicate with, and is also a social status or point of reputation, a mechanic which is visible within various gaming platforms such as Steam, Origins and Uplay. The more friends and items you have, the more you can unlock, which is a driving motivator behind developing weak ties.

Delving into anonymity and pseudonymity

Many people choose to interact via online spaces to perform an aspect of their identity in complete anonymity, or by adopting a pseudonym that carries some meaningful identifier without revealing too much about the individual, using various media to engage experiences that they wouldn't otherwise, losing their inhibitions to perform aspects of the self to a community. Some exhibit "benign disinhibition", whereby they interact in a manner that is acceptable offline, while others exhibit "toxic disinhibition"; behaviours that they wouldn't perform in real life that, given the lack of constraints online regarding courtesy and interpersonal proximity and physical customs (e.g. looking someone in the eyes during conversation), that Web 2.0 affords (Suler, 2004). For example, adopting an identity in the real world to harass others is seen as a social infraction and in some cases a crime, and thus for the majority of people is not something worth pursuing. However, in Counter-Strike:

Global Offensive (Valve, 2012), the act of using one or more throw-away or “smurf” accounts to harass others or gain an unfair advantage and even cheat is encouraged or even expected, even at the most competitive levels (Talkesport, 2015).

Pseudonymous identities versus anonymous identities can be contrasted by way of “assessment signals versus conventional signals”, or, put more simply, the effort required to build an identity in order to deceive or harass (Donath, 1999). Pseudonymous identities take more time to develop due to a greater level of detail, meaning that it is less likely that they will be discarded for the sake of toxic behaviour, given that a reputation is generally desired with a pseudonym for the purposes of developing one’s identity. By contrast however anonymous identities require little to no effort at all, allowing individuals to display socially unacceptable behaviours with no cost other than to perhaps an email address used to sign up for a service. In the context of online gaming, Valve’s online gaming platform Steam allows people to start up an account with only a verified email account, which is trivial given the number of different services offering recyclable email accounts. Newly created accounts are often used to engage others in toxic behaviour or to break rules, given the ease of acquisition and the relatively cheap cost of games in which this behaviour is common. In contrast are the accounts that have many items, games and friends attached, a reputation that would be too costly to lose, and thus a deterrent against antisocial behaviour (Matulef, 2017).

Regarding anonymity and toxicity, individuals are able to separate out various aspects of their identity by way of dissociation, due to the fact that (with the exception of serious law or vigilante enforcement), their online actions cannot be traced to their real self, granting a sense of freedom to otherwise pursue more questionable behaviours that come at the expense of others, such as trolling or flaming (Van Der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Individuals visiting a forum may be inclined to invent an identity in order to incite hostility within a community for entertainment purposes, and if found out can simply disappear or return with a new identity. While pseudonymity does afford a similar set of characteristics, the damage can be lessened somewhat by mindful community members given the reputation that is gradually associated with a name. Interestingly, individuals who are anonymous display more aggressive behaviours than those who can be identified, underlining the process of behavioural disinhibition and the increased tendencies towards toxic behaviour (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012).

Why online gaming generates toxicity and adversity

Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) while allowing individuals to communicate, does not afford the richness of face-to-face conversation, due to the lack of psychological and physical cues. Given the relative lack of identifiability, issues such as cyberbullying, “griefing” (deliberately interfering with somebody else or their belongings in a virtual world) and cheating have seen a surge alongside the popularity of multiplayer games, challenging and even perverting the definitions of Oldenburg’s third place.

Firstly is the problem of conversation as the supposed main activity. In competitive FPS games sound is essential to hearing the movements of other players, to the point where

anything that is considered “excessive microphone chatter” while a tense moment plays out in-game can rapidly degenerate the team environment and create adversity between the noisy team mate and the team mate trying to concentrate (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006).

Secondly is the issue of the third place containing regulars, specifically welcoming individuals. While Oldenburg states that regulars are responsible for attracting new players to a game (Oldenburg, 1999), Blackburn and Kwak have found that the opposite can be true, especially in competitive gaming (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). The “tone of conviviality” described by Oldenburg is challenged by players who, given the freedoms and lack of responsibility or accountability that CMCs present, instead choose to use exclusionary language such as “noob” (previously a somewhat endearing term from “newbie”, now largely derogatory) and insulting or criticising new players rather than supporting them (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014).

Lastly is the issue of levelling. While Oldenburg posits that all third places strip participants of world rank and status for an equal footing within the virtual world, the issue of rank is still a matter of contention, especially in competitive gaming where a low rank may be seen as a hurdle to winning (Kwak et al., 2015). While the scale of adversity may differ between day-to-day competitive matches and eSports (a term used to define the professional scene for popular online games where people compete for large cash prizes, trophies and prestige on an international stage), toxicity and adversity manifest due to the competitive nature of both settings (Kwak et al., 2015), with smurf accounts being another example of acceptable social friction (Talkesports, 2015). Being deemed unworthy is a factor in intra-team friction and ostracization for the individuals deemed unworthy or “casual”, versus the individuals who consider themselves superior and thus “power gamers”.

Conclusion and rationalisation of stream/argument

In conclusion, the disinhibition that manifests given interactions via CMCs grants individuals a sense of dissociative anonymity and in some cases pseudonymity, removing psychological checks individuals make when interpreting the fewer social cues available and the people they interact with in various third places. In the case of online gaming, it is clear that Oldenburg’s theory of such places is at odds with modern gaming, especially in competitive scenes where rank, skill and a lack of accountability combined with stakes or tension based on performance can motivate individuals to be toxic or to generate adversity between themselves and others. In the case of the stream of communities and games, while it is clear that online games can allow individuals to perform aspects of the self and socialise with others, it is arguable that anonymity and pseudonymity present many opportunities for individuals to generate toxicity and adversity in third places, especially in a competitive scene.

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