

Digitally evolved: MMO's demonstrate the advancement of communities in online space.

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to prove MMO's are representative of communities in online spaces, and then to demonstrate how they extend and improve on them. The problem is they are not communities in the tradition sense because proximity has been removed by putting them online. The method is research and arguing the following. The result is not only are they communities they are better.

Introduction

Although some claim communities cannot exist in virtual spaces by definition, Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMO's) demonstrate how the internet has extended the idea of communities by fostering new identities, allowing them to become new third places. This paper will begin by defining communities and explaining how this definition is exhibited by virtual communities. Next it will refute the claims virtual communities are not true communities and they can even harm existing communities. Following, it will argue how virtual communities overlap with existing communities, how they are inherently social, how constructing new identities gives them authenticity as communities, and how they have become the new third places. Finally, it will suggest how MMO's may continue to evolve the idea of communities in the future.

What is a community?

A community is defined as a group of people who identify themselves together around ideals and rules. Communities are constructed groups of people, usually in close proximity, who support each other and who share values, relationships, and goals to create an experience of belonging (Kendall, 2011). Communities are structured around sets of rules and standards (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007). Rules in turn define community's boundaries, determining membership and who belongs (boyd, 2017). In addition to a sense of belonging, one of the most important things a community gives its members is social identity (Delanty, 2009). The attributes which define communities, for example geographic location, also define their members, and in turn the values of the members ascribe values to the community (Kendall,

2011). Communities are groups of people who decide they are bound together by what they knowingly share in common.

Virtual communities are defined the same as offline communities, but possess additional traits which extend the idea of what a community can be. The internet has evolved traditional communities into virtual ones (Delanty, 2009). Virtual communities possess additional traits including having a specific goal, being hosted on a digital platform, requiring a hierarchical structure, and often having a profit model (Kendall, 2011). Offline communities may possess some of these traits as well but they are not essential. Online games like MMO's possess the same qualities as communities, their digital nature making them examples of virtual communities (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee, & Nickell, 2006). However the most fundamental trait to virtual communities is communication as digital technologies have removed the need for proximity (Delanty, 2009). Fortunately, they have also reduced the cost of communicating across great distances (Hampton, 2015). This dependence has bound virtual communities with communication; the internet, online games, and social networks are how the modern world communicates (Porter, 2015). MMO's are a prime example as they are social activities by design and thus require communication to operate (Frostling-Henningsson, 2015). Online games are built around people who create communities, sometimes referred to as guilds, who band together to collectively overcome an in-game obstacle, like a boss requiring a group of 20 people to defeat (Williams et al., 2006). Guilds have their own rules for membership and belonging, however the online space makes them difficult to enforce as without face-to-face contact players can simply return with a different avatar; ultimately this level of conflict cannot be too destructive as there are few examples of virtual communities ceasing to exist (Kendall, 2011). Consider Runescape, one of the oldest MMO's which has persisted in various forms for nearly 20 years (Ren & Tsang, 2015). Virtual communication may not seem authentic as player's faces are hidden behind screennames and avatars, however virtual interactions are based on authentic personality traits and offline communication often occurs without exchanging identities, for example asking a stranger for directions identities (Kendall, 2011). Authentic communication in virtual communities means physical attributes like race and sex remain significant as well as opinions connected to such traits (Kendall, 2011). As a result poor gaming performance is often

misattributed to race or gender because racism and sexism still exist online (Fortim & de Moura Grando, 2013). The anonymity of the internet catalyses such social antagonism, free of apparent consequences (Fuchs, 2010). However diversity is essential for virtual communities to thrive (Kendall, 2011). Virtual communities empower minorities, they place them on an even playfield; without diversity communal bubbles form, separating them free of new ideas and breeding conflict with other communities (Delanty, 2009). Virtual communities build on traditional communities by making communication a central tenant, strengthening them by providing access to a wider range of voices and values.

Criticisms of MMO's as communities

Detractors claim MMO's cannot be communities as they are inauthentic, however this is not true. They claim virtual communities are simply reflections of communities and individuals use them to pursue their own goals and not their community's goals; when this happens the communal voice is crushed beneath the platform's agenda (Kendall, 2011). A recent example occurred when the company behind the world's most popular MMO, World of Warcraft, punished a player for speaking out in favour of the protests in Hong Kong, leading many players to quit as they felt the platform's voice did not represent their own opinions (Davies, 2020). MMO's are designed to be social, but they are also built to be personalised, to make each player feel important to the game world, and this can depower users beneath the platform (Delanty, 2009). However, as discussed there are few examples of virtual communities ceasing to exist, implying the communities are the specific bounds players form within the game and not all other players. Detractors also argue these bounds are weak, again citing the commitment to individual play (Delanty, 2009). Even though sometimes true, weak bonds are just as vital to communities as strong bonds, as in a community with only weak bonds individuals are unsupported and there is no collaboration, and with only strong bonds individuals are sheltered from new ideals (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Weak ties thrive on high numbers of connections, like the millions of players in an MMO (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007). Weak ties also help players make new friends (Williams et al., 2006). To say the bonds built within MMO's are inauthentic because of networked individualism is a blanket statement, and even when true weak ties are necessary for strong communities.

A more extreme claim is MMO's are harmful to communities, this is also not true. It is argued community is being lost to modernisation, but the internet is saving community by giving it a new home; the internet does not harm community (Kendall, 2011). However, offline third places began dying before MMO's and online games rose to prominence as a result of a decline in communal engagement, leading to the rise of virtual communities; the internet connects people which allows communities to thrive in a time when social engagement is down (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Excessive gaming can lead to social isolation (Trepte, Reinecke, & Keno, 2012). However most gamers have the same number of offline friends as non-gamers (Domahidi, Festl, & Quandt, 2014). This demonstrates MMO communities are not replacements for offline communities, they are in fact an evolution and extension of traditional communities (Williams et al., 2006). Virtual communities do not kill offline communities, they are necessary for them to survive.

Evolving communities in virtual spaces

MMO's represent virtual communities at their strongest. Most games die quickly once their victory objective has been met (Kim, Lee, Thomas, & Dombrowski, 2009). The goals of MMO's are perpetually changing, giving them permanent longevity. Anyone can play an MMO (Frostling-Henningsson, 2015). However different players have different motivations, most play for personal or social goals (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010). These goals can range from having fun, socialising, obtaining power within the game, and escapism (Frostling-Henningsson, 2015). The internet has changed the structure of communities by creating an always online society (Hampton, 2015). People can choose to spend the vast majority of time in MMO's, essentially leaving the real world behind MMO's are alternate realities (Delanty, 2009). More than that they are hyperrealities. This means they feel more real than reality, making them perfect escapes (Frostling-Henningsson, 2015). The worlds of MMO's are almost entirely free from outside time and space (Hampton, 2015). This hyperreality demonstrates MMO's superiority as a form of online communication, and over real-life communities.

MMO's allow empower virtual and offline communities by allowing them to overlap. Virtual communities are not separate from offline ones; offline communities use online platforms to communicate and strengthen existing ties or to create new

ones (Delanty, 2009). Virtual communities often form in reaction existing communities (Kendall, 2011). This often occurs directly, as people are likely to invite their friends to join their online activities (boyd, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). Bringing friends online community is easier when teamwork is a shared value (Domahidi, Festl, & Quandt, 2014). Teamwork which is required to overcome the goals of MMO's. A strong virtual community will then adapt an offline presence. Familiarity, such as those between guild members, fosters offline relationships (Trepte, Reinecke, & Keno, 2012). While bringing friends online is boosted by teamwork, bringing them back offline is motivated by the drive for greater social influence (Domahidi, Festl, & Quandt, 2014). Both these motivations are present in MMO's, demonstrating their influence both online and off.

MMO's provide a platform for players to create new communities from scratch. Just as the internet has transformed communities so too has it transformed the act of socialising (Delanty, 2009). Socialising occurs through interaction with unfamiliar and through trial and error (boyd, 2017). MMO's feature both of these experiences. Online games in particular are social and cooperative, and for many this is its most important aspect; teamwork is more fun and rewarding than gaming alone (Frostling-Henningsson, 2015). While MMO's can also pit players against each other for rewards, even as teams, most players report appreciating the collaborative aspects of games over the competitive elements (Di Loreto & Gouaich, 2010). MMO's are social environments by design (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Playing online games is proven to be as effective as offline socialising such as playing a team sport (Williams et al., 2006). MMO's transform offline socialising by making it the key to success in their worlds.

Avatar creation in MMO's allows players to create new identities, authenticating them as communities. Identity creation is a lifelong process; identities given partially to oneself, and partially from others (boyd, 2017). Identity comes into being via social relations as individuals construct their identities in response to others in their community (Pearson, 2009; Kendall, 2011). Identities are dynamic in MMO's, users can represent themselves however they wish (Pearson, 2009). Player avatars can be different genders or species. Through whole communities of imagined personas, participants are able to locate their social identity (boyd, 2006). Imagined personas allow people to choose what they reveal about themselves, to curate their

identity, effectively creating new ones (Van Der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Identity curation allows players to maintain social bonds in a network while keeping sensitive personal information out of the hands of undesirables within the network (Pearson, 2009). Identity curation in MMO's allows expression without judgement, allowing players to reveal authentic aspects of their personalities (Frostling-Henningsson, 2015). The anonymous nature of MMO's allows players to craft authentic new identities which makes its communities authentic.

MMO's have proven themselves to be the new third places. Offline, first places are homes and second are places of employment, third places are communal places defined by being openly accessible, socially and communication focused, having regulars, being relaxed and playful, and feeling like a second home (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Third places are also flexible, a park for example is not limited to only one intended activity (Kendall 2011). MMO's are designed as places for social activities which depart from the game itself (Williams et al., 2006). Virtuality makes place dynamic, removing proximity makes place possible on a global scale (Delanty, 2009). The internet makes third places bigger. MMO's are third places as they possess all these traits, however in extreme cases they can also represent second places (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). An entire economy has sprung up around exchanging offline currency for stronger avatars (Heeks, 2008). However, offline third places can also appear to be second places through overuse, a commitment to a team sport can essentially turn it into a second job for example. MMO's represent third places evolved to accommodate the global community.

The Future

Through MMO's we can get a glimpse into how communities might evolve in the community. The current state of internet connections is called Web 2.0, referring to the foundational nature of communication to all online interactions; Web 3.0 refers to the theoretical next step where communication is replaced with collaboration (Fuchs, 2010). This refers to the web but maybe it could refer to the internet too including online games. Web 3.0 requires entirely cooperative communities and technologies which are currently not available, society is not there yet; but the internet has the capacity to support Web 3.0 when the day comes (Fuchs, 2010). In MMO's we can already see the potential success of Web 3.0 through their purely

collaborative nature games; even when playing solo there is still the invisible collaboration between the platform and the player. MMO's represent the future of virtual communities and the internet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, MMO's represent how virtual communities are not only examples of communities but how on many cases they even extend and improve on them. Communities are groups of people who identity together based on their shared values and interests. Online games such as MMO's represent virtual communities, communities which extend beyond the traditional definition by facilitating greater communication between its members and in turn inviting global diversity which strengthens communities with new ideas and perspectives. MMO's in particular depart from offline communities by being hyperreal, giving players a fantastical escapist world. These worlds allow offline communities to extend themselves by giving them another place to gather and communicate, and strong communities built in MMO's in turn create strong connections in the offline world. MMO's also allow for the creation of entirely new communities through inherently social cooperative gameplay. The use of avatars and screennames in MMO's allow players to create new identities using authentic aspects of their personalities, adding to the authenticity of their online communities. MMO's also represent third places but empowered by the internet to allow them to be communal places on a global scale. The often weak ties of communication in MMO's is not only essential to their operation but strengthens by forming new connections. They are not yet a replacement, they are symbiotic with communities, both are necessary for a good society. In the future the virtual communities and communities in general will likely resemble the collaboration of MMO's.

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