

More than a game: Levelling up relationships

Craig Lennard



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Abstract:

Online gaming is not generally associated with strengthening relationships and developing communities. However, patterns are emerging in research into the field of Online Multiplayer Games (OMG's), suggesting they provide a fertile ground for cultivating relationships and bridging pockets of society separated by age, race, and socioeconomic factors. Games as a focal point attract people providing them with a common interest to bond, which in turn becomes a medium for communication and relationship building. More than a by-product, some people are driven to participate in multiplayer games to fulfill social needs. Enabling this drive, is the internet's low-cost barriers to participation. Virtual communities for example, transcend geographical location and little emotional investment is required for interacting via an avatar. OMG's are providing a valuable space for people to engage, and with more consideration for virtual communities by the game developers, the benefits can be more inclusive to the broader society.

Introduction

The popularity of online multiplayer games has spread immensely. For example, PUBG Mobile an online multiplayer war-themed game for mobile devices, recently passed the 600 Million download milestone Naik (2019), in under three years. Online gaming is a stationary, immersive activity, taking up time that may be spent actively participating in the community in activities such as sport, socializing or community projects. This has led to online games being branded as pervasive, anti-social, immature and a general waste of time. The multibillion-dollar industry is shaped largely by wealthy game producers, marketed predominantly at young men, who are viewed by society as spending long hours alone playing video games. What is not well known, are the social affordances online multiplayer games provide the communities of participants. Communities are a main source of motivation for online gamers and contribute significantly to the success of online multiplayer games.

By broadening the target audience of whom online games are marketed at, and by implementing provisions for a more community orientated environment; game developers can build platforms with stronger communities leading to a more loyal customer base, while contributing positively to the social needs of society. The focus of this essay will be how online games strengthen community ties. It will outline the forces that draw people to participate in online games, how this develops into online communities and the social benefits for its constituents as a result. It will also discuss the influences that shape online communities, and how they can be developed to be more effective and inclusive. This essay will argue that despite the perception online multiplayer games foster social isolation amongst youth, they are a powerful platform with the potential to enhance relationships between diverse participants, because of their ability to bridge communities, broaden existing relationships and the internet's low costs of participation.

Before proceeding, it is important to define online games and virtual communities. Chin-Lung and His-Peng (2007) describe online communities as groups of people whose primary method for communication is electronic media, for example internet, where geographical location and cultural heritage are no barrier. People are attracted to online communities for several reasons, including satisfying needs, following interests, and forming relationships. Online games draw participants to not only interact with other people, but also gaming software (Steinkuehler, Williams, 2006). As the name suggests the games are played online, often inviting players to create fictional avatars and explore virtual fantasies with or against other players. Online games vary significantly in form and function. For example, casual in-app social media games such as poker can be picked up and played asynchronously and have no interaction with other players. On the other hand,

the servers of massive multiplayer online game's (MMO's) like World of Warcraft can have hundreds of people at any one-time role playing and participating in a themed virtual realm.

Online multiplayer games and their communities are typically played out through mediums such as computers and gaming consoles, over the internet.

The Online Gaming Community

Online games are a fertile ground for meeting people and growing relationships. Game participants are not drawn to game platforms by chance, or because they must be (Like a job); but rather because it is a genre, story or mode that appeals to them. This enables players to find other like-minded people, regardless of location, background, or age. The strong meeting point, or foundation that relationships are built on can even lead to some gamers to consider their online gaming friends closer than their offline friends, citing they have more in common Williams et al. (2010). In addition, research by Domaldi, Festl & Quandt (2014) found that spending time gaming socially had a significant impact on the probability of meeting friends online. Further, players whose primary source of motivation to participate in online multiplayer games was for the chance to interact with other people had an even higher chance of meeting new friends. Trepte, Reinecke, Juechems, 2012 have a theory that familiarity plays a part in forming relationships online. That is, the more time participants spend socializing with each other, the closer they begin to feel. This is found to be true for offline, as well as online environments. It is worth noting at this point, that the success for building relationships through online games depends on the type of game and how the developers have provisioned for the formation of social interactions and communities.

Communities play a pivotal role in online games. Research by Frostling-Henningsson (2009) link the primary motivation for online gamers is the opportunity to socialize, or work in cooperation to achieve objectives. The participants preferred gaming online over gaming alone, for the social benefits. Another motivator was connecting to new people in ways unlikely to happen in society, where prejudices associated with age or race may typically form a barrier. Building on the community's role in games, Williams et al. (2010) study on the MMO World of Warcraft (WOW) which went to great lengths to understand the dynamics of player guilds learnt that the more structured guilds (In-game faction/communities) tend to have a more social experience than the more loosely formed groups, which in turn directly affects the quality of time in the game in a positive way. Thus, a clear pattern is forming, where people are motivated to play games as a community, because the social affordances provide a positive experience. WOW guilds are some of the more organized online gaming communities to date though, so is only representative of a segment of online gaming communities in general.

Bridging Communities

The internet enables online multiplayer games to bridge communities, which facilitates bonding. The connectedness of the internet makes it possible for connections to develop between people that would otherwise be unlikely to interact with one another. For example, since the internet is not bound geographically, players can find themselves participating with people from all over the globe. And since the medium that players typically interact through is an avatar, gamers do not get to see one another or acknowledge socioeconomic class. One does not know, or care particularly the age or background of another gamer, so long as they are good at playing! Williams et al. (2010) confirmed this, discovering that guilds make it possible for people to interact with a broad range of people they are unlikely to connect with in real life; transcending socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. As the players communicate in groups or “guilds”, bonds start to form, and this has the potential to facilitate relationships growing from online to the offline world Domaldi et al (2014). These types of cross-networks are not common in the real world, as even sporting and social clubs are usually local to their demographic. Online games, and then internet, surpass these boundaries and make a broad range of connections possible.

The internet’s low-cost barrier to connect people opens the doors to segments of the community that are often unable to participate. At times isolated or, excluded because of the inability to participate in more physical or adventurous endeavors, online gaming is a practical and socially engaging activity for many people who suffer from a disability. Seniors too, with limited mobility have the opportunity to participate in online gaming communities. Some research was done in this area by (Nimrod, 2011) who confirmed the accessibility of online communities, and games, provided the opportunity to enhance the wellbeing of seniors that are unable to move around as freely. The research found that accessibility opened the door to online interactions and fun games that increased mental fitness, improved self-esteem and provided humor to help the participants cope with aging. We discussed earlier that players don’t have real life interaction with players they are meeting in online games, so interacting through an avatar makes it a more comfortable environment for people who suffer from social anxiety or struggle in social situations, again made possible by the low cost of investment in effort and emotions. Domaldi et al (2014) discuss this in their investigation of relationships among gamers, noting it is a good opportunity for these groups to meet new friends and turn them into offline friends. While the platforms exist, not all games are designed with the whole community in mind.

Developing More Than Just A Game

Online gaming communities are shaped by the game makers, and by the people using them. Williams et al. (2010) research into the guilds in WOW is worth

revisiting here. They found “*Game mechanics and social architectures have an immense impact on the resulting social formations and interactions within these spaces*”, and that if games were developed with building communities as an objective, the social returns could be significant. That said, online communities are essentially a bi-product of online games, with some community provisions baked-in, enabling online communities to form and shape throughout the lifecycle of the game. A lot of the success of these communities then falls on the shoulders of players to shape their own communities, and WOW guilds have proved a talented source for this. An example of this is the WOW.gamepedia, a website and community managed, by the community.

While noting earlier the potential for seniors to participate in online games, game marketers focus more on young audiences, all but ignoring seniors which is a cause for low adoption (Nimrod, 2011). More could be done by the game publishers to encourage a broader, more inclusive community. While game publishers are in the business to make money by developing games and not communities, an opportunity exists to stretch their brands further and build more diverse communities if they are more inclusive of the broader society by design.

The communities can exist across multiple platforms and can originate online or in the real world. Relationships in online gaming communities often originate offline, with groups of friends banding together to participate in a collaborative activity. This is proven to strengthen bonds, extending relationships to new dimensions and public spaces, a topic that is touched on shortly. It was mentioned earlier that relationships formed online can extend to the offline world, and Trepte et al (2012) provide further insight showing gaming clans can be close to the point where offline contacts can provide support for other clan members. The point is, online game relationships span into the offline world, and across other platforms, and this can help to build stronger relationships. Domaldi et al (2014) have defined this scenario as “Media multiplexity theory”. The theory suggests that individuals use a mix of different platforms, including online and offline; to foster close relationships, and that weaker ties typically use one medium. How strong these ties become is not clear, it may be hard to argue a relationship built using a mix of platforms is closer than a relationship form in the real world, where interactions are face to face and there are no second mediums.

The fulfilling of social needs, and a new place to develop these needs are affordances of online multiplayer games. Analyzing social needs derived from online community orientated games, such as Facebooks Farmville; (Di Loreto, Gouaich, 2010) use Murray’s human sociological needs as a source for participant motivation. Affection needs, and information needs are motivating factors for people to participate in online gaming communities. Examples of these sources are in-game messaging, exchanging objects and being in the presence of friends using the app in real-time. This illustrates that online games provide a platform to help satisfy social needs, or what is also described as a third space. Third spaces provide a space for “*social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home*” (Steinkuehler, Williams, 2006). The third space online

games create for communities to socialize and relationships to develop is not dissimilar in nature to parks and café's, it's a space beyond home and the workplace. These theories tie in with what we discussed earlier, the effectiveness of the third space and how far a game goes to satisfy the social needs of its online community of users is influenced largely by the developer.

Conclusion

Online multiplayer games provide a new space for people to meet, strengthen ties and build communities on a foundation of shared interests. The community, that is ancillary to online games draws people to participate, and in turn provides social benefits to its users. There is an opportunity for game developers to incorporate more community orientated objectives into games, that in turn will lead to stronger better functioning communities that will encourage more people to play. As this essay has demonstrated, people are drawn to collaborate with other people in online games, and the familiarity of returning gamers helps relationships to grow. These affordances bridge communities by go beyond socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural barriers. The low entry costs to participate in online games such as the now ubiquitous internet and low emotional investment, make it a suitable platform for seniors and people who suffer from disability or social anxieties. That said, game developers will influence immensely how inclusive these platforms are, and how well they facilitate the development of online social games into thriving online communities. To understand the relationship between online gaming communities and the social benefits they provide better, further research could focus on how the category of multiplayer game can be linked to social outcome, and if the anti-social behavior in some games results in negative consequences out-weighting the positive.

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