

Virtual Community and Online Game Players



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INTRODUCTION

Since the Internet and other IT technologies have become more popular than ever before, the amount of time people spend with computers and IT products, such as Internet and online games, has increased tremendously. The continuing boom of information and communication technology is causing the Internet to become a part of everyone's life. People use the Internet not only as a tool for their jobs, but also to participate in virtual communities. Even if the rate of Internet uptake slows considerably (Weisenbacher, 2002), the trend still remains growing. There were 275.5 million people using the Internet in February 2000. That number had changed to 605.60 million in September 2002 (Nua Ltd., 2002). According to Horrigan's study (2001), 84 percent of Internet users in America have participated in a virtual community. Moreover, apart from the number of people using Internet, the average time spent doing any activity online is increasing.

Examples of virtual communities are found on bulletin board systems (BBS), Internet relay chat (IRC), multi-user dimensions (MUD), and the World Wide Web (WWW). Each of these systems enables people from all over the world to connect together in the virtual spaces created by each respective system and communicate, have public discussion, and form virtual communities. These online groups exhibit a wide range of characteristics and serve a variety of purposes, from small groups engaged in tightly focused discussion of specific topics, to complex created worlds with hundreds of simultaneous participants, to millions of users linked by an interest in market or exchange networks for goods and information (Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

This study introduces, first, the two popular kinds of online games, massive multi-user online game (MMOG) and multi-user domain (MUD), and the ways in which they are similar and different. The succeeding section looks further into the factors that

cause these differences by using use and gratification (U&G) theory and interaction theory. Suggestions for research propositions and possible implications of such online game virtual communities use are proposed at the end of the entry.

MASSIVE MULTI-USER ONLINE GAMES (MMOG)

Online computer games today have achieved tremendous market success. Millions of people connect online to play games everyday. The largest number of players is usually found in MMOG and constitutes a big cyber-community that includes not only adolescents but adults as well.

One of the leading MMOGs today is the Sony online game, EverQuest. Griffiths (2004) states that a choice of role-playing character affects style of the play and the reception of the character in the game directly. Consequently each character can be played as good or evil, as a member of a friendly or unfriendly race, and as exercising a profession that makes the character a team player or more of a loner. The players can either play group or solo in the virtual world.

The appeal of MMOG is that there are many options a gamer can choose. For this reason, gamers are more attracted to MMOG than any other game, and that is why MMOG cannot be underestimated as an important study in this chapter.

The main cause of Internet addiction is socialization. "Since the aspects of the Internet, where people are spending the great amount of time online, have to do with social interactions, it would appear that socialization is what makes the Internet so addicting" (Grohol, 2003). For instance, going online is one of the easiest ways to interact with new people who share a common interest, without any physical barriers and, also, has low risk. Thus, people are easily attracted to the Internet.

MMOG addiction can be considered in the same way that Internet addiction has also been considered. The advantage of MMOG over solitary gaming is social interaction. Griffiths (2004) describes the favorite features of playing an online game, EverQuest. The features are described as playing for social reasons, enjoyment of violence, being able to play alone, game-specific features, no end to the game, other features (e.g., exploring, strategic thinking, character building, etc.). Results showed that the most popular features were the social features. Results also showed there were significantly more adolescents who specifically state that violence is their favorite aspect of game play.

Yee (2002a) defined three main attraction factors that make people invest more time on MMOG (especially EverQuest). The first attraction factor is reward, and the second is the network of relationship. The third factor is immersive nature of virtual environments. There are several reasons why relationships of a platonic or romantic nature occur so frequently in MMORPGs. The anonymity and computer-mediated chat environment facilitates self-disclosure, and many players have told of personal issues or secrets to online friends that they have never told their real life friends or family. The high-stress situations inherent in the game also help build trust and establish bonds between players very rapidly. Of course, another important reason is that the games were designed so that you have to group together to achieve most goals.

A network of online friends encourages players to invest more time to the game for several reasons. First of all, a player plays to catch up or remain around the same level as their friends. Secondly, a playing schedule, whether tacit or explicit, may be created and with it an expectation that each player will show up to join the group. And, finally, the more friends you have, the more obligations you have to fulfill. Being in a guild is a way in which these obligations become structured and recurring. Thus, having a network of friends encourages both a higher level of personal attachment and time investment.

Yee's (2002a) third attraction factor is the immersive nature of virtual environments. It works by encouraging players to become attached to their characters and also to those virtually valuable items they come to own. The immersive nature also encourages players to become personally invested in what happens to their characters, and to be empathetic toward them. In the

same way that a movie or fairy-tale can enchant you, the immersive quality of MMORPGs works to enchant you with fantasy and makes you feel you are part of something grand and extraordinary.

Yee (2002b) also defined the following five motivations as aspects of MMORPGs appeal to EverQuest users. Relationship is a measure of desire to develop meaningful relationships with other players in the game – usually in the form of a supportive friendship. Players who score high on this factor usually make good friends online, and tend to have meaningful conversations with their online friends that usually involve talking about real-life personal issues.

Immersion is a measure of desire to become immersed in a make-believe construct. Players who score high on this factor enjoy being immersed in a fantasy world they can wander and explore. They tend to role-play their characters and use them to try out new personalities and roles.

Grief is a measure of desire to objectify and use other players for one's own gains. The means may be either outward or subtle. On the outward side, they may enjoy dominating other players by killing them on the battlefield, or by taunting and annoying them. On the more subtle side, they may enjoy manipulating other players for their own gains by deceiving them through clever scams or begging for money and items.

Achievement is a measure of desire to become powerful within the construct of a game. Players who score high on this factor try to reach the goals defined by the game, and they play very hard to accumulate rewards

Leadership is a measure of gregariousness and assertiveness of the player. Players who score high on this factor prefer to game in a group rather than solo. They are often assertive individuals who drift to leadership positions in a group.

The way MMOG works is totally different from MUD. First, MMOGs almost always have fancy features to let players become totally immersed in virtual reality. Second, MMOGs allow players to add rooms and valuable objects by simply clicking a few buttons. Third, although MMOGs connect many players online at the same time, most MMOGs are more combat-oriented and hence require fewer messages to be typed during playtime. Essentially, MMOGs differ from MUDs in that MMOGs deploy more user-friendly multi-media features to immerse players while MUDs value player internal characteristics.

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