

Virtual Organizations in Commerce Games



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VIRTUAL ORGANIZATIONS IN COMMERCIAL GAMES

Modern computer games—one of the most common forms of entertainment today—have given rise to a diverse and rapidly changing collection of virtual organizations. These organizations, some of which are particularly large, are focused around the play, and to a lesser extent the development, of the games themselves. All share a number of the properties of the more traditionally recognized commercial or business virtual organizations and teams—electronic communication, geographic distribution of the members, changing membership, lack of permanence, and shared sense of purpose or identity (Barnatt, 1995; Jagers, Jansen & Steenbakkens, 1998; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1999)—though differing in their focus on non-commercial activities and in particular entertainment, leisure, and play.

This article provides a brief background to the technology of modern computer games before discussing three categories of virtual organizations that owe their existence to games:

- Player and developer communities,
- Player teams (clans and guilds)
- Developer teams (mod teams)

The article concludes with a discussion of trends in this area.

INTRODUCTION: COTS COMPUTER GAMES

A multi-billion dollar international industry, commercial off the shelf (COTS) computer games are high-technology mainstream entertainment products. A modern computer game is typically developed by a large team (generally 20 to 50) of individuals, most games possessing a budget in excess of a million dollars. The relatively recent addition of multi-player support to most

games; the availability of low-cost gaming platforms (home consoles and cheaper PCs); together with the rapid improvements in the technology (bandwidth and reliability) and penetration of networking hardware, has seen an explosion in the number of online gamers and a corresponding rise in the number and diversity of games-focused virtual organizations. This section briefly covers the major technological issues in computer games as they impact virtual organizations tied to the games.

The Penetration and Social Impact of Games

According to the Entertainment Software Association—a lobby organization for many of the major game development companies in the United States—50 percent of all Americans play computer or video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2006a). That manifested as over \$7 billion in sales (in the United States alone) in 2004. The average adult player is said to spend over seven hours per week playing, with 43 percent of most frequent game players (a term that is not defined by the ESA) playing games online (Entertainment Software Association, 2006b, 2006c).

While these figures are likely to be higher than other countries (with the possible exceptions of countries such as South Korea and Japan) it is not unreasonable to expect similarly-scaled play data figures for many European nations, Canada, and Australia. Clearly this equates to millions of people (perhaps over 100 million) worldwide spending something approaching a billion hours of leisure time each week playing games. With such international and often individual investment in the play of games it should come as no surprise that various organizations—with the game as focus and often medium of communication—have arisen.

Other examples of the impact of computer games include the long running debate—both academically, socially, and legally—of the impact of violence in games (see for example Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Washington Post, 2005), the growing serious games movement in

which games are employed for non-entertainment purposes (see for instance Barlow, 2005; Michael & Chen, 2005), and some of the negative social phenomenon such as games addiction (BBC News, 2000; Motluk, 2005), murder (Tapei Times, 2005) or even death through over-play (BBC News, 2005).

Platforms and Genres

The two most common dimensions employed for breaking down the field of computer games are hardware platforms, and game genres. These are relevant from a game-centered, virtual organization point of view because certain game genres and platforms are far more likely to engender player organizations than others.

There are three primary types of gaming platforms—PCs, consoles, and mobile devices. Consoles—the Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony Playstation 2, Nintendo Wii—account for something approaching 90 percent of all game sales (in the United States.). The PC game market continues to shrink at around 10 percent of all game sales being for PC, with the remainder being mobile devices like Sony’s PSP, the Nintendo DS, and the various Nintendo GameBoys. Despite its smaller share of the market, PC games, and hence players of games on the PC, still account for most of the virtual organizations focused on gaming. This is due to the maturity of the area (PC gaming is well established), the more open environment for the platform user (in terms of support tools and the games themselves), and the good networking infrastructure built into the platform.

Game genre (see for instance Wolf, 2000), is a broad categorization of game type on the basis of the game’s subject matter, goal in play, type of interface, player perspective, intended audience and other features. Popular genres include *Action*—controlling an individual in an interactive 3D environment that typically contains puzzles, fights and other challenges; *Sport*—football, tennis, and the like; *Racing*— typically in a car; *RPG*— role-playing, typically in a fantasy setting; *1PS/FPS*—first person shooter in which players control heavily armed characters from a first person perspective; *RTS*—real time strategy games; and *MMORPG*—massively multiplayer online RPG, RPGs with large persistent worlds and a large number of simultaneous players. Of these genres 1PS, MMO and to a lesser extent RTS and RPG are the genres most responsible for spawning player or developer virtual organizations.

Multi-Player and MMO

Multi-player is the ability of a game to support collaborative or adversarial play by two or more people simultaneously in the same game world. It is this feature which is nearly always a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the engendering of player organizations focused on a game. That is the game itself serves as a central gathering point—first bringing players together to create a sense of community, then leading to the creation of player or development teams.

All game platforms, and most genres of games, now provide multi-player support; though differing in how fundamental and versatile the support is. A relatively recent development in the field of commercial games (see Bartle on MUD history to see just how much the non-commercial variants have led the way) is the technology and genre known as massively multi-player online (MMO). MMO describes a persistent game world to which hundreds or thousands of players can be connected simultaneously. Popular and successful examples of MMO games include World of Warcraft, with over 5 million active players per month (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005), Runescape, with over 5 million active players (Jagex), and Guild Wars, with over 1 million active players (NCsoft, 2005).

GAMES COMMUNITIES

The loosest and most amorphous of COTS game-based virtual organizations are communities of players and developers. The most popular games in many genres attract a level of enthusiasm such that dedicated players see themselves as existing in a community. These communities are supported by Web sites dedicated to the game. Popular Websites for the most favored games possess hints, FAQs, walk-throughs, active bulletin boards, interviews with developers, and so on. and receive tens of thousands of hits (visits) each day and up (see for instance Planet Half Life, or Moyer, 2006 with the claim of 5 million page views per day at Al-lakhazam.com). Further, MMOs, with their persistent worlds and large player bases, engender communities also. Finally, the modern consoles with their dedicated online gamer services also explicitly and deliberately create communities.

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