

Understanding Virtual Communities in Online Games

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DEFINITION AND EVOLUTION OF ONLINE GAMES

Along with rapid innovations in IT technology for the last few decades, the world of online games has emerged as one of the most exemplary and fast-growing forms of the Internet economy. Broadly, the term *online game* covers a variety of Internet-based computer games in which network users log on to host computers through the Internet and play with other users on a real-time basis. However, strictly speaking, there are at least three different subcategories within the online game: “network game” such as Blizzard’s *Starcraft*, “Internet game” such as MSN’s *MSN Games*, and “online game” in a narrow sense such as EA’s *Ultima Online*. Such differences include the number of gaming participants and the range of interactions allowed by a given game system, graphical richness, and the relative openness of a game’s spatiotemporal environment.

Online games are often synonymous with variants of MUDs (Multiuser Domain or Dimension). MUDs are text-based games in which a systematic series of interconnected virtual, textually described, locations allow a game user to interact with a variety of computer-programmed creatures and numerous user-controlled characters. Primarily equipped with UNIX-based chatting system, MUDs first appeared in England in 1979 and gained their popularity in the United States during the 1980s owing to the popularization of PCs and modem-based online networks. In the 1990s, the term *MUG* (Multiuser Graphics) came to prominence to specify graphic-interfaced MUDs, which appeared along with the emergence of separate graphic engines and digital image-processing technology. Currently, MUGs equipped with elaborate graphics and advanced networking system are sometimes referred to as *MMORPG* (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game). EA’s *Ultima Online*, Sony’s *EverQuest*, and NCsoft’s *Lineage* are popular examples of the MMORPG.

Table 1. Major Online games worldwide (<http://www.gamesites200.com/mpog/>, <http://www.mmorpg.com>, http://www.wordiq.com/definitin/list_of_mmorpgs, & <http://www.mmorpg.net>)

<i>Anarchy Online</i>	<i>Nexus: The Kingdom of the Winds</i>
<i>Asheron’s Call</i>	<i>Phantasy Star Online</i>
<i>Asheron’s Call 2</i>	<i>Planetside</i>
<i>Atriarch</i>	<i>PristonTale</i>
<i>City of Heroes</i>	<i>Project Entropia</i>
<i>Dark Age of Camelot</i>	<i>Project Visitor</i>
<i>Dark Ages</i>	<i>Puzzle Visitor</i>
<i>Dark and Light</i>	<i>Puzzle Pirates</i>
<i>Dragon Empires</i>	<i>Race War Kingdoms</i>
<i>Dragon Realms</i>	<i>Ragnarok Online</i>
<i>Elysaria</i>	<i>Rune Conquest</i>
<i>EVE Online</i>	<i>Runescape</i>
<i>EverQuest</i>	<i>Shadowbane</i>
<i>EverQuest II</i>	<i>Shattered Galaxy</i>
<i>Final Fantasy XI</i>	<i>The Sims Online</i>
<i>Gemstone IV</i>	<i>Star Wars Galaxies</i>
<i>Horizons: Empire of Istaria</i>	<i>There</i>
<i>Kings of Chaos</i>	<i>The Realm Online</i>
<i>Lineage</i>	<i>Toontown Online</i>
<i>Lineage II</i>	<i>Ultima Online</i>
<i>The Matrix Online</i>	<i>Underlight</i>
<i>Meridian 59</i>	<i>Warhammer Online</i>
<i>Middle Earth Online</i>	<i>Warring Factions</i>
<i>Neocron</i>	<i>World War II Online</i>



The term *MMORPG* captures the much-broadened technological, economic, and sociocultural aspects of contemporary online games. Currently, there exist about 300 active online games in the world, and Table 1 shows principal commercial online games, mostly consisting of MMORPGs.

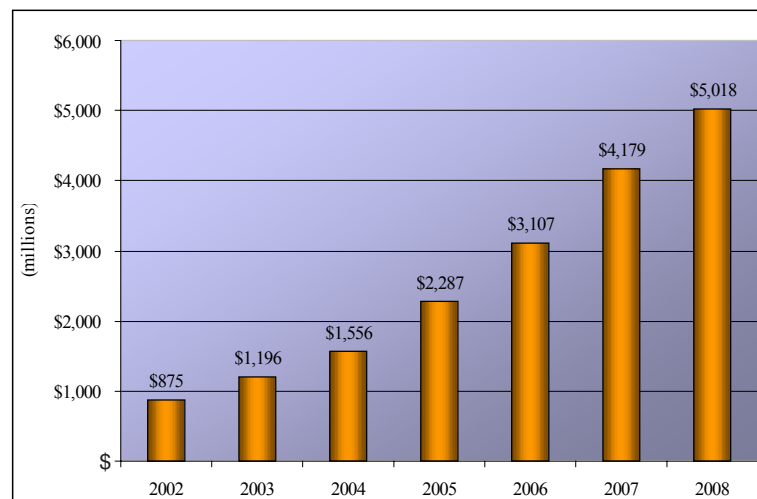
In MMORPGs, players choose a game character, also known as an “avatar,” and spend their time conducting various tasks given by game plots. These activities include interacting with other players, and shaping their own virtual but simultaneously social experiences in cyberspace, as will be examined in the next section. Online games have begun to be major sources of revenue for gaming companies. For example, EA’s *Ultima Online*, first developed in 1997, currently has more than 200,000 subscribers along with US\$4 million revenue per month (Bartle, 2001). Sony’s *EverQuest*, which launched its commercial service in 2000, have about 400,000 active user accounts along with US\$208 million of annual revenue (Castronova, 2001). Most notably, NCsoft’s *Lineage* in South Korea currently has about 4 million account registrations, and its total revenue in 2003 amounts up to about US\$160 million with 30% of net-profit rate (Kanellos, 2004b; Moon, 2004; see also Park, 2004). Although the online game market is still smaller than that of console games, about 114 million people accounting for over US\$3 billion revenue are forecast to be gaming online by the year 2006 (DFC Intelligence, 2003. See Figure 1). Witnessing the explosive growth of online game market and its high net-profit rate, console game developers such as Sony (PS2), MS (Xbox), and Nintendo (GameCube) began to produce online network adapter and launch online game service in 2002. Moreover, this economic activity raises important questions about how—or if it is even possible—to distinguish between the virtual and the real.

QUESTIONING “THE VIRTUAL” OF ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES

One of the most significant factors that contributed to the astonishing prosperity of online games is recent innovations in the broadband Internet sector. As online games depend on intensive exchanges of large-sized audiovisual and textual data among hundreds of thousands of real-time users, broadband networks such as xDSLs (x-digital subscriber line), CATV lines and HFCs (hybrid fiber coaxial) are prerequisite to the suitable operation of online games. Recently, as shown in South Korea, the market’s high demands for online games often compels game developers and distributors to aggressively invest in broadband Internet market (Kanellos, 2004a). This investment is a clear example of the enmeshment of processes often thought to be separate, that is, the virtual worlds of online games and the real worlds of IT infrastructure. For instance, Blizzard’s *Starcraft* has been a powerful factor in proliferating the 24,000 broadband-networked PC-café’s found on nearly every street corner in urban areas of South Korea (MIC, 2003; Park, 2004). However, while the broadband Internet infrastructure is a necessary condition for online gaming, it is not sufficient. There must also be a sense of community or sense of belonging among game players (Castronova, 2001; Park, 2004), which is the effects of digitally simulating the real-world objects and human bodies, that is, the production of simulacrum.

With respect to online games, the real and the virtual are integrated in other important ways as well. For example, online games have much longer product life cycles than other forms of games, which is directly connected to the game providers’ stable profit model. While conventional console or PC-based off-line games have retail-

Figure 1. Online game revenues: present and prospects (DFC Intelligence, 2003)



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