

## **‘I have mates all over the world’ – Cultural aspects of Multiplayer Gaming – Building Communities Online.**

The concept of a community has been around for thousands of years with many different definitions occurring such as ‘a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage.’ [1] However the concept of an online community is somewhat different. Rheingold describes online communities as ‘cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace.’ [2] It seems to be appropriate from these examples that Preece [3] states that there is no accepted definition of an online community, possibly due to its relative youth as an issue to be examined. Preece goes on to explain the core characteristics of online communities defined by Whittaker, Isaacs and O’Day in 1996. [4] They state that they comprise of members who have a shared goal, interest, or activity. The members also share information and participate in regular events which form strong emotional ties. This definition is still somewhat vague however and simplifies the concept of many modern day online communities.

One problem with explaining online communities is that much of the research is from interviews or surveys and mainly produces quantitative data about who plays the game rather than why they play it. [5] This issue has been recently counteracted by researchers such as Nick Yee who will be examined further on. There is also the issue of how different cultures can change online communities, primarily how western culture reacts differently to eastern culture when it comes to the importance of online communities in the wider world. The author will examine the differences of the two cultures in respect to online communities, following an overview of the types of online gaming communities available currently.

### **Types of communities**

The idea of community has been around for many years. Tönnies determined in 1955 [6] that there are two types of community: *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* is the ‘traditional’ community of a gathering of people who all help each other out, all know each other and there is a strong bond between all people within that social circle. *Gesellschaft* consists of the more modern day ‘community’ whereby people are too busy to form strong bonds with others, they may know many people but few of them to any depth. The relationships instead become shallow and only important for brief amounts of time. It is the idea of being lonely while still being surrounded by people. Many online communities conform to the *Gemeinschaft* with everyone knowing each other within that microculture, but one could also argue that the internet on the whole is similar to the *Gesellschaft* with it being so huge that it can be quite simple to never encounter others from your ‘real world’ microculture. These microcultures can be broken down even further in the case of some games to be examined.

## PC Gaming Community

The PC online gaming community is extremely large ranging from the casual gamers playing simple puzzle games (such as those available on Yahoo Games and PopCap), the Sims series of games, to those who play MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) and individual and team based FPSes (First Person Shooters). As MMORPGs and FPSes are two of the biggest genres on the PC, these will be examined in depth as key examples of the PC gaming community.

## MMORPGs

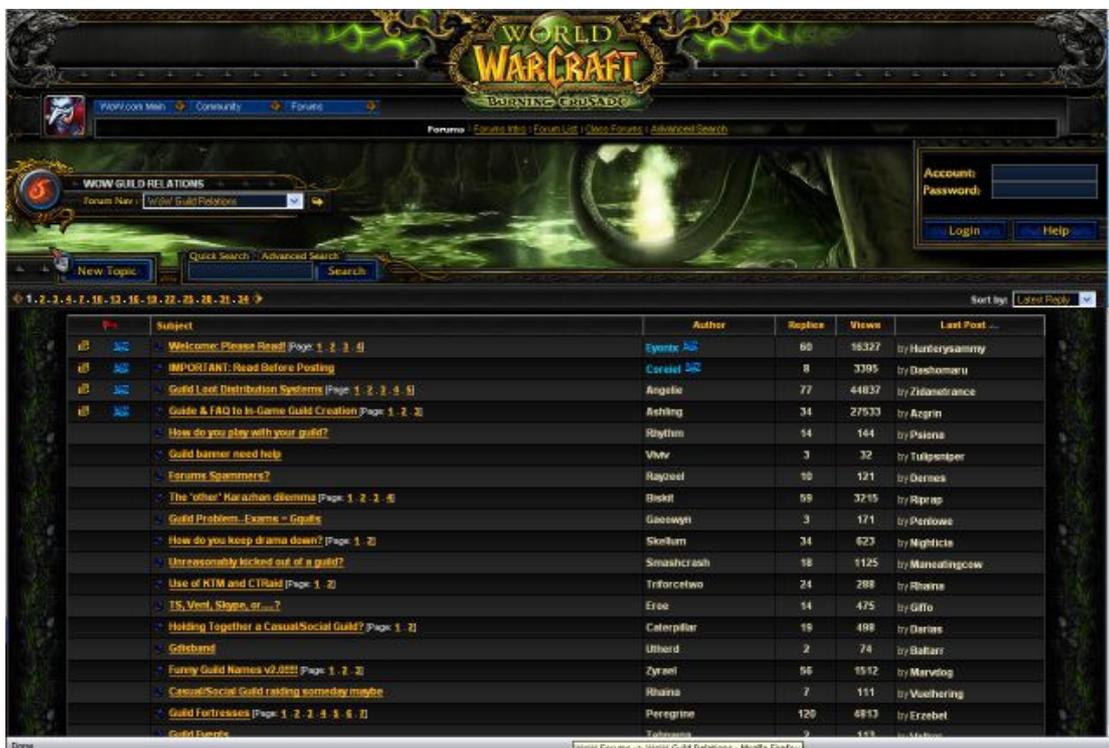
MMORPGs most typically use a number of different methods to encourage communication between its many players. The most popular MMORPG currently [7], World of Warcraft, offers ways for its players to communicate both from within the game and from their internet browser thanks to its account system. Within the game one can communicate through typing what one wishes to say and through the 'emoticon' system:



The player can use the /t (tell) command to talk with another player. They can also show certain movements such as in the case of the above picture, pretending to fall asleep by typing the command /sleep. This adds a certain personalised element to the game making the player feel more like they are communicating with another person rather than just some computer pixels. The game also offers the ability to form groups temporarily within the game so that a group of five players can join together to complete a quest together rather than play alone. It also offers a more permanent

alliance in the formation of guilds. These guilds have their own hierarchal structure with a guild leader and a number of officers being the only people able to invite others to the guild. These guilds often encourage members to play together to achieve a common goal, most typically to become the strongest or biggest guild on the server. In wishing to achieve such things, players are forced to join together and become sociable with each other to achieve their goal: similar to that of a Gemeinschaft style society whereby everyone in the community joins together to improve life for them all.

Outside of the game world, World of Warcraft offers its own official forums to allow players to communicate when they are not able to discuss the matter in game (Such as while they are at work) or when the matter involves a large amount of discussion which would be trickier to do within the confines of the ‘chatbox’ in the game. These forums tie into the player’s account details so only active members can log in to post. One of these sub forums is the guild relation forum which turns the game into a much more political object:



Blizzard, developers of the game, even go so far as to arrange ‘real life’ events for its players to encourage them to meet up in person, the last of these events being in January 2007. [8]. It also ties in with other non gaming online communities by offering its own Myspace page [9], Myspace being an online blog community typically used by a wide range of young people as well as bands promoting their songs.

Besides the official forums, many guilds create their own personal forums to discuss guild issues and tactics for future raids. It is arguable that besides creating friendships from across the world, it also encourages teamwork skills and the ability to create strategies to achieve a common goal. James Paul Gee looked at how MMORPGs such

as Everquest could help people form knowledge and skills that would be much harder to learn outside of a game, many of these being social skills. [10:170]

One of the newer elements to communication methods for MMORPGs and especially FPS games is to use voice communication. This is typically through programs such as Ventrillo or Teamspeak. These programs allow players to talk through microphones while playing a game. Despite more requirements than most text based communication applications (a voice based one requires each player to have a microphone, and for one player, or a server, to act as a central server so that everyone can communicate), these applications are becoming increasingly popular due to the speed of use. A player can simply talk while playing a game rather than interrupt their activity within the game to type a reply to a question, for example. This is particularly crucial in MMORPGs during large scale raids as time can be vital in such an instance, similarly in FPS games, due to their fast nature, taking the time to type something could become a matter of virtual life or death within the game.

## **FPS Games**

FPS games tend to take a slightly different slant on the way that MMORPGs provide communication methods. Most of the genre's games take their communication design from games such as Counterstrike which popularised the team based FPS game. Games such as Counterstrike typically have a server which allows for up to 32 players to play at any one time. They play through a series of short maps and can drop in or out of the game at any time they want. Because the servers tend to be quite small (in comparison to an MMORPG's server) a more close knit community can form amongst the players. From the author's past experience, relationships can develop through the game. As the game is so fast paced it is difficult to communicate while playing, but once you are killed in the game you have to wait a short amount of time until the round ends to play again. During this 'downtime' the player can type or speak to other dead players, enabling them to talk both about the game and other things. The author has witnessed in previous games, one particular server with a group of 'regulars' who discussed the development of one female player's pregnancy throughout the months. Other experiences have consisted of discussions of nights out and of relationship problems. Discussion of these problems tended to transfer over to a forum, similar to that of the unofficial World of Warcraft ones, presumably to allow the thread starter to explain such problems in more depth than is allowed in a fast paced game with rounds typically lasting 3 minutes at most, and a map lasting 30 minutes. There are of course more banal and immature banter that is used within games, but this is similar to a regular conversation in person, it allows for a wide range of topics to be discussed.



There seems to be an underlying theme of people logging onto an online game purely to be part of the community rather than to play the game. Games on the whole can become tedious and predictable after continuous plays, but with human interaction involved it can become more interesting, or at least more sociable for those who cannot or do not wish to go to a more stereotypical social situation (Such as a bar). Koivisto investigated in their research the concept of players playing a game purely to ‘talk’ with their friends. The example of the MMORPG Toontown is used with a 48 year old male explaining that they stay with the game purely because of the friends they have made, which encourages him to return to the game. [11] Koivisto goes on to explain that communication design is one of the key elements needed in an online game to encourage players to return to the game, regardless of the game mechanics in same cases.

## Console Gaming Communities

Console games approach the idea of community slightly differently to the PC gaming world. For many years console games had a limited community, the idea of playing a console game online entered the mainstream at a much later date than PC gaming. PC games were simpler (in theory) to connect to the internet or to other PCs due to their improved networking capability at the time. Console games only really started to feature online with the advent of the Sega Dreamcast which went online in late 1999 with games such as Chu Chu Rocket. This was with a dial up modem however so was not hugely popular due to such low speeds being inappropriate for fast paced games. It was not until the launch of X-Box Live with the X-Box and the growth of broadband that console online gaming caught on within the mainstream of console

games players. X-Box Live went on to extend this idea with its various community features included in the X-Box 360. These features encompassed a variety of communication methods. While allowing players to compete via the achievement and gamerscore system, enabling players to vie for the most gamerscore points in the shortest amount of time, it also encouraged multiplayer games. Some games such as Gears of War require players to play ranked online games together to gain some of the achievements such as the ‘Seriously...’ achievement which involves killing 10,000 players in the game. One particularly infamous achievement is that of the NBA Live 07 achievement which requires the player to be online at the same time as 1,000 other players, a somewhat hard task the older the game gets as less people play it online. Difficult achievements such as these have spawned websites such as X-Box Achievements [12], community sites devoted to helping each other gain achievements through working together and arranging matches specifically to gain the one difficult achievement. In February 2007 the community arranged a gathering to gain the aforementioned NBA Live 07 achievement. [13] They succeeded and gained a large amount of coverage from other games sites as well as rewarded their own members with an ‘award’ on the forum to show that they had helped others. Besides the innovations in communication that the achievement system has brought, X-Box Live also offers voice communication and text based communication as well as a friends list interface similar to features used in chat programs such as MSN Messenger.



## Dependencies on Communication

Both PC online gaming and console online gaming encourages those with similar interests to work together to achieve a common goal, whether it be to win a counterstrike match, defeat a large monster or simply to be playing a basketball game at the same time. However there is an argument that these forms of working together and communication can encourage addiction. Chee and Smith [14] look at this issue primarily from the perspective of MMORPGs such as Everquest. They argue that 'People are indeed addicted to this game, but they are only addicted in the sense that people everywhere have a need for identity and community.' [2003:3]. It is possible that players feel that they have to play regularly, otherwise they might 'miss out' on some key event as these games run in a persistent world. They may also see it as escapism by talking to their in game friends rather than their real life friends, creating a dependency culture. Chee and Smith's research determined that the main driving force which compelled players to return to the game was the development of the player-driven economy and the guilds within the games: all human controlled elements. [2003:8] Ducheneaut and Moore looked at how player interdependencies affected MMORPGs [15], in their research they used Star Wars: Galaxies but this idea can be extended to most forms of online games. In the case of MMORPGs, most players rely on other human players for their trade goods, the ability to complete raids and simply to gain experience in a session quickly such as in Everquest where forming a group proves advantageous due to an experience bonus and the ability to kill monsters faster. Strangely the most popular MMORPG at the moment, World of Warcraft, has no bonus to grouping and it is often more efficient for the player to play alone, which slightly detracts from the idea of the need for community, until later levels when guilds are required for raids in dungeons known as instances. In the X-Box 360 community, the player dependencies are provided through the achievements that require online play such as Gears of War's many achievements for ranked games, and more minor achievements such as the NBA Live 07 one previously mentioned. In both MMORPGs and X-Box Live there is also the added challenge of wanting to compete against others, in MMORPGs to be the highest level with the best equipment, and on X-Box Live to have the highest gamerscore.

## Different Cultures

In Eastern countries such as China and South Korea this competitiveness can be taken to extremes. One famous incident was where a Chinese man killed another man over a virtual sword. Qiu Chengwei stabbed Zhu Caoyuan in the chest when he found out he had sold his virtual sword (from the game Legend of Mir 3) for 7,200 Yuan ( around £473) last year. [16] He was sentenced to life imprisonment. While China does not have any specific laws regarding virtual theft, South Korea has a section of its police force devoted to investigating in-game crimes because it is such a common occurrence. This demonstrates the more negative elements of an online community, showing that much like the real life society, it can attract more dubious people willing to commit crimes for their own gain.

## Arguments Against Online Community

The core argument against the concept of online communities within games is stated by Robins. [17] He believes that online communities are located within 'the world we live in' meaning that the online community can not exist without the existence of a 'real' community. He also states that 'virtual culture is a culture of retreat from the world' (Robins: 166) meaning that it is not a true community, more a temporary escape or retreat. Kroker extends this idea by suggesting it is like an 'electronic bunker'. [18] Sardar is particularly critical of online communities, stating that besides being extremely selective they are also dependent on a 'shared interest of those with the attention-span of a thirty-second soundbite'. [19] This suggests that the communities are as long lasting as the attention-spans of those involved within such a community. Robins echoes this idea and sees virtual life as 'regressive, infantile and Edenic'. [17:106] It is difficult to tell whether such critics are correct as many online communities are comparatively young. It would be useful to be able to conduct research over a number of years to determine how a community evolves and changes throughout its life span, and whether Sardar is correct in his idea that they fade relatively quickly, or whether more permanent bonds are created between the players. Currently both ideas seem to be the case in the author's experience but this is a narrow view of the 'world' of online communities as it is so vast. Further work could also be used to examine Sherry Turkle's ideas of online communities helping the confidence of some players [20] and also an examination of the many negative elements of such communities such as the concept of online bullying and violence, and the ways in which service providers are trying to combat it.

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