Understanding the Virtual Community of Gamers’

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual community can be defined as “a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 1). With the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies such as listservs, bulletin boards, discussion forums, and chat rooms, the time zone differences become less critical and geographical distance and limitations diminish.

A virtual community is primarily a social entity where people relate to one another by the use of a specific technology (Jones, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Schuler, 1996). As emphasized by Wood and Smith (2001), “people who use CMC technologies and people who study them are increasingly aware that the Internet is fostering relationships not just between two individuals but among many, many more people” (p. 109). People can also form a “close-knit” relationship (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997), though they are relatively more disperse as people can come from any parts of the world. The closeness or proximity in virtual community is a result of the social interactions that occur between the members. It is further suggested that the members of a virtual community are more homogeneous in their characteristics and homogeneous in their attitudes (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). Stolterman, Agren, and Croon (1999) refers to virtual community as a new social “life form” surfacing from the Internet and CMC in which individuals and groups seek social support (Walther & Boyd, 1997).

This article aims to present the social world of virtual gamers in EverQuest (EQ) using “institutional” theoretical perspective. First, this article begins with an overview of the phenomenon of virtual communities. Then, I will describe the background of online gamers by offering the historical-social analysis of EQ and the studies that have examined EQ as a context. Additionally, I will define the concept of community and virtual community and then present the several types of virtual communities. The subsequent section of this article consists of a discussion from the perspectives of “new institutional theory” as the main theoretical lens in this type of study. Last, I will present a brief overview of potential future work on virtual community in general and online gamers in specific, and finally conclude the chapter.

EVERQUEST AS A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

The virtual community of gamers environment to be looked at is EQ. EQ is the world’s largest premier three-dimensional (3D) massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). It is a game that attracts an estimated 400,000 players online each day from around the globe and, at peak times, more than 100,000 players will be playing EQ simultaneously. The game’s players interact with each other inside and outside the game for game playing, game-related, and nongame-related interactions, and for buying and selling game-related goods. EQ, as a game, is characterized by well-defined social structures, roles, interaction rules, and power relations. EQ, as a virtual community, encompasses all of the different kinds of virtual community. EQ is a virtual community of relationship, a virtual community of place, a virtual community of memory, a virtual community of fantasy, a virtual community of mind/interest, a virtual community of memory, and a virtual community of transaction.

The social world of EQ does not only comprise hundreds of thousands of people playing the game but it also consists of people who are participating in social activities outside the game. It is also a busy crowded world. These people are players of the game, and they interact between each other inside and outside the game for casual interactions. This has led to the spawning of online and outside of game social activity that is
RESEARCH IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Over the past years, research in the virtual community has grown and intensified. Moreover, with the expansion of CMC, these technologies provide a platform and new ways for global society to meet, communicate, collaborate, socialize, and shop (Burnett, 2000; Turoff, 1991). Much of these works involve case studies, ethnographic studies, or personal interviews with community participants where researcher’s content analyzed textual documents from the context.

For example, an interesting case study conducted by Radin (2001) looked at the issue of social capital and transformations of trust on a breast cancer Web site. Radin found that there was a three-stage process in which (1) newcomers “lurk” in an environment that is rich with breast cancer information and observed the community at their leisure; (2) participants are offered several ways to share personal disclosures, thus building mutual trust; and (3) a variety of shared activities, both virtual and face-to-face helped to build trust. This study showed that these three stages are sequential in helping some participants increase their trust levels. Furthermore, Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002) conducted a study using the philosophical inquiry method to describe the role of computer networking in fostering electronic determinants of trust and its use in virtual communities. His study emphasized that trust has two dimensions, not three as had been found in some other settings. Trust was composed of trust in abilities and trust in integrity. These two studies seem to be important because institutional change and transformation rely on social movement and coalition building, which rely on the interface of trust for those pushing for change.

Other studies such as Wall (1999) conducted a comparative case study to understand how sense of community is created, perceived, and maintained by the membership of several synchronous online communities. Rosenblum (1998) carried out an ethnomethodology study to describe the ways four couples maintained their relationships primarily through online communication in synchronous Internet environments. By understanding the concept of sense of community and its impact on the relationship of online community members, the study provides insights on the underlying mechanisms that are involved in developing, stabilizing, and changing institutions.

Furthermore, there are several other studies such as from Wick (1997) who examined the discourse of...
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