MMORPG Roles, Civic Participation and Leadership Among Generation Y

Richard Hartshorne, University of Central Florida, USA
Phillip J. VanFossen, Purdue University, USA
Adam M. Friedman, Wake Forest University, USA

ABSTRACT

The notion of an ‘effective citizen’ is very complex and has very different meanings for varying individuals. However, the development of an effective citizenry is critical for a democratic society to thrive. One potential method of developing an effective citizenry is through the use of MMORPGs in civic education. In this paper, the authors report the results of a survey of the civic engagement and civic participation of college student players of the massively multi-player online role playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW). Findings indicate that respondents reported being more civically engaged than other segments of the population within the same age-range. Lastly, the authors explore the implications of the results and the potential of MMORPGs for developing an effective citizenry.

Keywords: Civic Education, Guild Leaders, Guild Members, Guild Officers, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)

INTRODUCTION

In order for a democracy to flourish, civic participation among the citizenry is necessary (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Engle and Ochoa argue that this citizenry must have “a willingness to be responsible for the state and to engage at all levels in decisions that chart its course” (p. 18), and that merely possessing “knowledge of the mechanics of government,” (p. 17) is not sufficient for citizens without the ability to apply this knowledge appropriately. Thus, in this paper, an effective citizen will be defined as an individual “who has the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the ‘office of citizen’ in our democratic republic,” and among the characteristics of this individual is that s/he “Actively participates in civic and community life” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2001). Civic education is critical to the development of an effective citizenry of a democratic society, and citizens of tomorrow need to be provided with numerous and varied opportunities to interact with activities involved in being active, engaged citizens. One method with potential for providing these participatory experiences is through the use of so-called massively multiplayer online role playing...
games (MMORPGs) (VanFossen, Friedman, & Hartshorne, 2008).

THE “GAMER” STEREOTYPE

At first glance, the role of MMORPG play in civic engagement and leadership may appear counter-intuitive. Indeed, a common stereotype associated with MMORPG players is that of a video game ‘addict’, one who spends much of his or her time devoted solely to game play, rarely participating in civic or social interactions outside of the gaming environment. This stereotype is supported, to some degree, by existing research. For instance, in their study exploring the social interactions of 912 self-selected MMORPG players, Cole and Griffiths (2007) averred that college-aged students are perhaps more susceptible to this predicament with symptoms such as poor academic performance and social isolation—factors that undoubtedly hinder civic participation and leadership. However, this is not necessarily the case as recent evidence suggests “digital natives”1 (Prensky, 2001) are, in fact, civicly active. In their 2008 study of American teenagers, Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, and Vitak found “little evidence to support the concern that playing video games promotes behaviors or attitudes that undermine civic commitments and behaviors” (p. iv). This was echoed by Xenos and Foot (2008), who commented, based on their review of existing literature of the generation gap in online politics, that in the “world of politics and public affairs on the Web in particular, the youth cohort is active and vibrant” (p. 54). Not only does the Internet increase the availability of civic information, but also provides participatory opportunities through the use of various Web 2.0 applications. For example, by simply clicking on a Web link, individuals can participate in various civic actions such as signing petitions or voicing a political opinion (Bennett, 2008).

MMORPGS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The development of both civic leadership and engagement among its citizens is a central necessity for any government to flourish: it is critical to discern the characteristics of effective leaders, as well as the factors that lead to civic engagement. As previously noted, one approach that holds potential for fostering the development of civic leaders and promoting civic engagement is through the use of MMORPGs. As MMORPGs become a more popular form of digital entertainment, it is important to examine their potential usefulness in facilitating “digital natives” transition to the active citizens of tomorrow.

As their name suggests, MMORPGs are played by a large number of people, from all around the world. Hill (2010) notes that although precise figures are difficult to obtain, it is nevertheless estimated that over 15 million people are involved in these games, with a large percentage of the market share (10 million people), participating in World of Warcraft®. For an individual to participate in a MMORPG, s/he must assume a fictional character (known as an avatar), and as such, interact with other avatars. However, it is important to note that an avatar retains its characteristics during subsequent playing sessions. With the rise in popularity of MMORPGs, a new area of research has begun to emerge.

Synthetic environments, such as World of Warcraft (WoW), have “provided a new way for youth to create communities that extend beyond geographic boundaries” (Bers, 2008, p. 141). Engaging learners by providing environments that support various civic leadership and participation activities in a variety of contexts (Bers, 2008), MMORPGs provide a type of social structure in the synthetic world that can parallel civic leadership and participation in the ‘real world.’ In their research on the role of online civic engagement tools in promoting civic engagement, Raynes-Goldie and Walker (2008) found that these synthetic worlds and associated communities can serve as “a valu-
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