The Social Psychology of the Everquest Videogame

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To an outsider, the social mechanics of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game such as Sony Online Entertainment's Everquest may seem insignificant or non-existent. However, within the bounds of the digital world that is Everquest there is a booming and, to an extent, a culturally diverse social world. As the name of the genre suggests, a role-playing game is one wherein a player assumes an alternate identity that exists within the bounds of the game. Although Everquest may at first seem to be all about adventure, sword banging, and dragon killing many users would agree that the heart of the game play relies heavily on extensive social interaction between players. This is probably the case with most massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). This paper will serve as a social field guide to Everquest, highlighting observations from a freshman psychology major interested in exploring the inner social-psychological aspects of virtual communities.

Collaboration and Altruistic Behavior

When one progresses deeper into the game, known as "high end," teamwork becomes a critical factor. Without it, a user of Everquest will have a difficult time progressing and moving up in status. Within this realm, interpersonal skills are intensively put to the test. One must work with others in organizations called "guilds" or else rely on the altruism of random players to help them achieve their goals. Rather than viewing the quest for success as "survival of the fittest," Everquest groupwork more relates to a system of *reciprocal altruism*. This theory, as explained by Buss (1999),

states that psychological mechanisms for providing benefits to others can exist in cases where such favors are reciprocated in the future; both parties therefore receive benefits. Economic theorists refer to this social exchange as "gain in trade," wherein "cooperation between two or more individuals for mutual benefits" (Cosmides and Tooby, 1992).

Guilds dominate the "high end" and "low end" game, with players of all levels of progression flocking to them. The structure of the more serious "hardcore" guilds tends to resemble that of a corporation. There is a formal application process and a probationary process (during which time players are evaluated). Dedicated players go through the rigors of these procedures in hopes of being promoted to a "Full Member," usually getting paid on credit called "DKP" (Dragon Kill Points) used as currency for bidding on items that are won in guild successes. In many ways the game play is similar to that of a real-life job (Yee, 2006). The corporate world is apparently taking note. In their book *Got Game*, Beck and Wade (2004) report that MMORPGs such as Everquest are "an amazingly effective training camp for critical business skills…[creating] masses of employees with unique attributes: bold but measured risk taking, an ability to multitask, and unexpected leadership skills."

Sometimes a player and the aforementioned organization (guild) they belong to may not work well together. This forces a player to make a decision on whether or not to move to a new guild (a career change of sorts). This can create quite a bit of cognitive dissonance because guilds actively seek dedicated players and feelings of loyalty to one's guild mates may arise, when there could possibly be a better guild out there for that individual. One cannot simply move in and out of guild membership. Guilds require varying levels of play time each week, and set minimum raid quotas (the requirement to

participate in group raids) for probationary and full members to abide by. When a player moves in and out of guild membership often, they are deemed a "guild hopper" and tend to receive quite a bit of social disapproval from fellow players. This can manifest itself in a many forms, but probably the most detrimental form is denial of guild membership. There is no room for indecisiveness, but the dynamics of Everquest definitely help produce such feelings.

Aggression

Considerable research has been conducted into the role of videogames in the expression of aggression (Anderson and Dill, 2000). Regardless of whether Everquest playing leads to actual expressed aggression, the game is often a breeding-ground for the virtual expression of aggression. Everquest in many ways resembles that of a real-life work force, and also has an economy. These dynamics promote greed and envy, among other things. Also, interaction in the virtual form (via the internet) leads to less inhibition in the user, including the more nefarious players (Turkle, 1997). Although the internet is often revered to be a means of easy friend-making, it is just as effective at making enemies.

Conformity, Compliance, and Race Relations

In his work, *The Social Animal*, Aronson (1999) details the many ways that humans concede to the pressures to conform to the behaviors and opinions of other persons or groups. We value our acceptance and may experience feelings of anxiety or inferiority when we fail to conform. There are major elements of social rules and, consequently, conformity to be found in Everquest. The behavioral correlate of conformity, *compliance*, becomes an issue when situations within the game dictate that

there are certain rules that players must abide by, or else face ostracism and exclusion from other players. Noncompliance can be seen in the actions of players who steal items from monsters taken down by rival guilds (or even their own), or smaller raiding groups called "parties" without first rolling dice (in game) over these items or discussing their acquisition with the group. These players face a large amount of social exclusion in game, and usually end up having to fend for themselves due to the fact that other players are too afraid to risk their reputation or rewards to be involved with these individuals.

In an effort to promote fairness and order, there are operational rules partially imposed by the game administrators (Sony); a good example would be that racial slurs are strictly forbidden. This may seem to be an odd rule, because many players tend to be culturally oblivious, especially when it comes to African American culture. There are a high percentage of European and Asian users of Everquest, but African American players are rare (although they do exist) (Yee, 2006).

Virtual racism is part of the storyline of Everquest, although it is not to be taken seriously. Different races of good and evil moral alignment exist within the character creation scheme, and these groups generally do not get along well. This is true with other fantasy games as well and has been for quite some time. This probably stems from story books and older games like "Dungeons and Dragons."

Relationships

Something common in Everquest, and endorsed by those managing the game, is online relationships. Players can actually write petitions to Game Masters (GMs) to have them host an in-game wedding, give out cake and champagne, and change their surnames (each player at a certain level gains the ability to chose a last name, a surname). All this

is simply a farce, however, there are many more serious relationships that form and are sometimes pursued via Everquest. This is perhaps because the people who play it are often outside a real (as opposed to virtual) social realm, although they may not convey that message to fellow users. However, this is not universal. Many people from varying marital, social, and cultural statuses partake in Everquest (Yee, 2006).

Many Everquest users take socialization one step further, joining special online forums (a popular form), online voice chat servers (TeamSpeak, Ventrilo), Web Cam, and sometimes even meeting in person. While face-to-face meetings are rare, personal attributes that convey the likeability of one's character are revealed through these virtual routes. It has been said that relationships formed in this manner and pursued to a degree of commitment have little chance of prolonged success. This author feels that the previous statement is somewhat accurate. Even though the chances of success may be lowered by the fact that these relationships were formed via virtual means (the internet), there is still a potential for a successful and meaningful relationship.

The relationships formed through Everquest are usually not romantic. Many take more of a friendly manner. Some of the friendships formed on Everquest become very strong, perhaps even to the extent of those formed in real life. The interdependence required in Everquest demands these sorts of relationships, because without them there is a low chance of receiving help from other players. Friendships formed on Everquest are usually more exchange-based than communal. People meet and help each other, often on a fixed schedule of group events. Further research is needed to explore the nature of these social relationships.

Some may see Everquest as a potentially harmful addiction, while others may view it as an innocuous escape from the troubles of everyday living (Yee, 2006). The game can meet either of these conditions, depending upon the psychological makeup of the person who is playing it and how well they manage and integrate it with their way of life. Everyone needs hobbies and time to devote to recreation. Through years of observation and experience, this author feels that Everquest is typically a more harmful addiction than a hobby. The game is designed so that it demands large amounts of time, with elements of chance and luck that make it so that it both hooks and agitates the player at the same time. In recognition of these features, it has been proposed that a new entry, Internet Addiction, be included in the next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders (refer to Appendix I for full diagnostic criteria).

Conclusion

The discipline of social psychology enlightens many aspects of our daily lives, and with some measure of knowledge in this field, one may begin to more accurately and perceptively interpret the world around them. This author's experiences as a daily player of Everquest over the past five years leads to insights into this virtual society that non-users may fail to comprehend. This paper represents an attempt to document these experiences as they mesh with my chosen study of psychology. It is a fascinatingly complex social phenomenon that is one of many new ways of presenting ourselves to the world around us, as mediated by technological advances that promise only to become more integral to our lives in the future.

Appendix I

Proposed Internet Addiction Diagnostic Criteria (Beard & Wolf, 2001)

All of the following must be present:
1. Is preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session).
2. Needs to use the Internet with increased amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction.
3. Has made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use.
4. Is restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use.
5. Has stayed online longer than originally intended.

At least one of the following:
1. Has jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet.
2. Has lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet.
3. Uses the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression).

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