

Gaining more than experience points: Learning social behavior in multiplayer computer games

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ABSTRACT

Online multiplayer games have become complex social worlds. As such, playing these games requires more than simply accomplishing the games' objectives: it is also a process of socialization into a community of gamers. Through our observation of players activities we begin to outline where, when and how social learning occur in these games. We show how playing multiplayer games can teach valuable interpersonal skills, some of which may translate to the real world. These observations could form the basis for the design of future games that purposefully encourage social learning.

Author Keywords

Online games, computer-mediated communication, ethnography, socialization, social behavior, social learning.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, playing computer games used to be seen as a solitary activity. There is, however, widespread evidence to the contrary: gamers often sit together in front of a single machine, sharing skills and expertise to accomplish the game's objectives [6]; and as soon as machines could be connected to one another, gamers were quick to exploit the possibility to live and play in shared virtual worlds [1,2]. It took the recent explosion in Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), however, for mainstream media and public opinion to realize that computer games have become full-fledged social worlds in their own right.

Despite this new attention, little is known about how these social worlds work in practice. The PlayOn project at PARC is currently investigating the social dimensions of multiplayer online games to shed more light on this issue. One of the topics that we are investigating is in-game

socialization: how new and current players become members of groups, learn how to interact with others, and eventually take roles and positions in the game society. This allows us to observe how computer gamers learn social behavior from playing.

In this paper, we report on some initial findings from our studies. In particular, we show how MMORPGs are about much more than gaining "XP" (experience points). Instead, they are virtual platforms players can use to learn (and later teach) the interpersonal communication principles that are appropriate in online 3D environments. As we will discuss, these interpersonal skills may also transfer out of the game and into real life.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The PlayOn project was launched in June 2003 and involves a combination of "virtual ethnography" [e.g. 4, 8], Conversation Analysis [9] and interviewing of veteran gamers. The combination of these methods enables us to observe and capture natural player practices - from the initial "grouping sequences", when several players decide to band together, to the social banter and chit-chat occurring between game events. Through these observations we can see how players acquire the skills needed to participate fully and meaningfully in the wider community of a game.

So far we have recorded more than 200 hours of game play from 4 games: EverQuest Online Adventures (EQOA), Star Wars Galaxies (SWG), SOCOM and Counter-Strike on 2 platforms (PC and PS2). During this workshop, we will use EQOA as our main source of examples - but it is important to emphasize that the principles we outline apply equally well to other online games. EQOA is particularly interesting to us because it is a console-based MMORPG and, as such, tends to attract more "casual" gamers than the PC. We think observations of casual gamers are more representative of the future gaming population than the hardcore, dedicated players.

As of today, there are more than 50,000 people playing EQOA in the U.S. The game takes place in a fantasy world, Tunaria, broadly inspired from the works of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien. Much like pencil-and-paper role-playing games, players select a "race" (e.g. elf, human, dwarf, etc.)

and a “class” (e.g. wizard, warrior), both of which will affect their attributes and abilities. Players then take control of an “avatar” or virtual body in an elaborate 3D space, where they battle a variety of creatures and accomplish quests to progress in the game and develop their character.

FINDINGS

From “XP” to social capital

Early on in our observations, we were struck by the social complexity of current multiplayer online games such as EQOA. Most accounts of games focus on the apparently mindless task of killing monsters and accumulating experience points to make your character evolve. While it is true that a player spends a significant amount of time engaging in such pursuits, a no less significant amount is spent communicating with others. At a minimum, talking with others helps to accomplish the game’s objectives (e.g. asking questions about the location of an object or creature). But more often than not, talking with others is an intricate part of the game. For instance, EverQuest’s missions are unbalanced so that only a coordinated and complementary group of players can accomplish them [5]: composing a group, and performing a specific role within it, are therefore essential tasks in the game.

As a result, gamers need to do much more than mindlessly accumulate XP: they also need to increase their social capital within the game’s society. In other words, they need not only learn the game commands, but they must also become socialized into the game community. To be recognized as a good player you need to learn the lingo, perform your role well when grouped with others, and more generally demonstrate that you are an interesting person to play with (e.g. through humor). If you succeed, others will include you in their “buddy list” to encourage further interactions. Eventually groups of players who enjoy their time together can form “guilds” or “clans”, which are semi-permanent social structures for organizing their members’ activities. In short, these games are all about having the right social skills – maybe not exactly the ones you would use in the real world, but social skills nonetheless.

Social learning in EQOA

Having established the importance of social skills in those games, we sought to uncover where, when and how players are given the opportunities to learn and demonstrate them. We found four central loci of social learning:

- *Self-organization* among players: as we said earlier, accomplishing the game’s objectives requires coordination among players; however, players must organize themselves into small groups. Activities such as group creation, group maintenance, and group disbanding are important moments where the players can observe and learn how to behave as a member of the game community.
- *Instrumental coordination*: this covers moments in the game when players have to work together as a team to

accomplish the game’s objectives. Being able to perform a role reliably is a mark of a player’s social competence.

- *In-game sociability*: this includes things such as humor (or its absence), small talk, players catching up with each other. This is as important to group cohesion, if not more, than instrumental coordination.
- *Helping behavior*: players often need to share knowledge and sometimes even help each other altruistically. The ways in which help is sought or provided are important, and separate the successful members of the community from others.

We will now describe the social skills acquired and demonstrated (or not) during three of these four moments (space constraints forces to skip over player self-organization). During the workshop, we will illustrate how successful and unsuccessful social learning happens through the example of two players: Rabratose and Wigster¹, whom we encountered while observing activities in EQOA. We will use empirical data and show video clips of actual game play we recorded. In this paper however, we will focus only on the high-level theoretical points.

Instrumental coordination: learning to play a role

Once a group is formed, each player has to learn how to play his or her role correctly. As we mentioned earlier the game’s missions are purposefully unbalanced, and group members must coordinate their actions in order to succeed. Over time, the entire community of players has evolved several cultural practices to deal with this issue of coordination, practices that newcomers must learn.

Basically, a player in EQOA can play one of four group roles: “tank”, “healer,” “caster,” and “melee.” A good group is one that is balanced in terms of the classes that can play these roles. The most efficient combat strategy is to attack only one opponent at a time. This is the responsibility of the tank (rugged weapon-fighting classes): he “pulls” (or attracts) a single opponent toward the group, and then “taunts” it so that it only attacks him. This facilitates the work of the other group members. While the opponent is focused on the tank, the healer must heal only one character. Failure can occur if the tank pulls several opponents at once, causing the healer to be overwhelmed, run out of power, and eventually everybody dying for lack of healing. Similarly, the tank also distracts the opponent from the caster. The caster (spell-casting classes) uses powerful magic to help bring down the opponent. Casters, however, are extremely vulnerable and die quickly if attacked. It is the responsibility of the tank to make sure this doesn’t happen and, if it does, the responsibility of the healer to remedy it. Finally the melee (weaker weapon-fighting classes) assists the tank in combat and in keeping opponents away from the healer and caster.

¹ Even though the two cases are based on real data, these are pseudonyms used to protect our participants’ privacy.

We have also observed another less formal kind of role in groups: what might be called the “guardian.” Indeed, another community-evolved practice in EQOA is “power leveling.” Basically, this involves enlisting a higher-level character to help a group defeat opponents that are too powerful for it otherwise in order to gain XP at an accelerated rate. The guardian usually brings the opponent down to nearly half of its “hit points,” or health, and the group can then finish it off. The guardian, however, must keep a watchful eye on the process: if he does too much damage, the lower-level players will not receive the XP; if he does too little, they run the risk of dying and he must intervene to kill the opponent before it kills the group.

This brief overview skips over some of the finer details of group combat coordination, and yet it should be quite clear already that playing in such a group requires a lot of skill. As players become more experienced, they learn to perform their tasks better and better, up to the point where they can start teaching those concepts to others. Playing EQOA is, therefore, a really important source of learning about how to be a good teammate. In fact, our observations reveal that players who refuse (consciously or not) to play these group roles are quickly shunned. Among the social skills learned we can list:

- Leadership: advanced players must learn to be good conductors and orient the activities of newcomers. Style is of the essence here: this is a game after all, in which players want to have fun. As such, authoritarian dictators are rarely successful. Instead, good high-level players are more empathic. They reinforce “good” group behavior (e.g. a tank carefully pulling a single monster) and point at coordination problems (e.g. recommend that a caster stands away from combat).
- Sensitivity to others’ needs: players need to observe the activities of other group members and adapt their actions accordingly. If the healer is overwhelmed and out of power, for instance, it is bad practice for the tank to immediately start bringing fresh monsters toward the group. Players who do not act according to others’ needs are quickly excluded from the group.

Sociability: learning to be agreeable

Combat sequences are only a fraction of the game. EQOA has a certain rhythm built into it, where combat alternates with periods of “downtime” (e.g. running from one location to the next). These calmer periods are an opportunity for the players to chat with each other about a variety of topics, game related or not. As such, they are an important social stage where players can learn about sociability [10], that is, social interaction that is pursued for its own sake and need produce no extrinsic results.

Indeed, playing MMORPGs is essentially about hanging out with people. They have become a new form of “local pub”: instead of having a few drinks and a lot of laughs with your friends, you battle a few orcs and have a lot of

laughs with your friends. Games like EQOA are not focused purely on instrumental coordination (i.e. how to kill monsters): there are opportunities for sociable interaction too, and these are another important source of social learning.

As a lot of game time is spent “doing nothing” (or, to put it differently, not killing anything) it is important for a player to demonstrate that he is an interesting person to be with. While some may enjoy hours of running silently in the game’s wilderness, we found that most players would much rather use this time to talk to each other. During these moments, humor and the “lol” response (i.e. laugh out loud) are extremely important for group cohesion and success.

As such, periods of downtime are a perfect platform for players to experiment and learn about sociable behavior – a skill that could easily translate to the physical world. Players learn about how and when to use humor, and how to approach strangers and progressively build up relationships. Moreover, games are an ideal platform for experimenting with sociability for two reasons:

- There is always something to talk about. The game’s objectives are ideal conversation starters and ice-breakers: players share a lot of common ground because of the game’s framework – if nothing else, you can always talk about the last monster killed or where to go next. This prevents what we call “interactional paralysis”: unlike other physical or virtual spaces, the context of the game encourages interaction.
- The mediation of a virtual avatar, the use of pseudonyms, and text-based communication all reduce the risks of failed interactions. Unlike real life, there is little stigma for experimenting with new jokes or trying to approach unknown others. As such games are interesting platforms for testing interactional strategies that can later be reused (or not) in the physical world.

Helping: learning to learn and teach

As players enter the game world, they are confronted by a bewildering array of new and foreign concepts – much like a stranger entering a new culture. Online games, particularly of the role-playing fantasy genre, share a rich culture that dates back to at least the 1970s. This includes entities, concepts, lingo and practices evolved out of the early text-based MUDs [1], pencil-and-paper based games such as Dungeons and Dragons [3,6], and interactional practices borrowed from Internet Relay Chat and Instant Messaging (e.g. brb, afk, lol).

The game manual, however, says nothing about these concepts: instead, the greatest resource in learning how to play is fellow players. In fact, it seems game companies have even acknowledged this fact implicitly. Game manuals are frequently quite skinny, limiting themselves to a cursory description of the most basic commands. Players are encouraged to ask questions in the game and to rely on the players’ community for knowledge.

Therefore, online games offer another source of social learning: namely, learning how to ask questions and more generally how to learn from others. We observed three forms of in-game knowledge acquisition:

- Asking questions in the game: for instance, “What is the best technique for pulling?” This can be done either by “shouting” the question in a town, or on a more person-to-person basis in the context of a group or some other interaction. The latter is often a more successful strategy: players learn to establish a rapport with others instead of randomly begging for help.
- Observe other players (for instance, “how to pass the orc tunnel”). Most of the game’s actions are carried out in public view. As such, it is easy for players to stand at the periphery and observe the actions of more advanced and successful players. In some ways, online games support a form of legitimate peripheral participation [Lave and Wenger]. It is acceptable for an avatar to stand close to the action and observe silently. These observations can then form the basis of more focused questions (see above), which have a higher chance of being answered.
- Teaching from other players (for instance, teaching “newbies” how to power level). We discovered that people are surprisingly willing to help out their fellow players with quests and other things, even when there is no obvious benefit for themselves. This seems to contrast with everyday life, and games could therefore teach not only skills but also values, and more precisely altruism. But we also think this altruism stems from three game features:
 - Players can easily access profiles of other characters which provide their class, race, level, guild, etc. So, for example, when asking for help regarding a wizard quest, one can easily identify the higher-level wizards who are in the vicinity. Players therefore learn to identify the most appropriate person to talk to. With the increasing amount of information available about a person on the Web nowadays, this skill may transfer to the real world.
 - When trying to find someone to approach, players often use the private “tell” mode of the text-chat interface. This mode of communication is minimally invasive (i.e. it can be easily ignored), so it may increase the likelihood that people will ask for help (see also our earlier discussion of sociability).
 - Most importantly perhaps, helping out another player can be fun in itself. In doing it, players can socialize with the question-asker, show off their knowledge, and maybe make a new “buddy.” This is important enough that some games have started to offer rewards for teaching others: in SWG for example, teaching another player a skill generates “apprenticeship” points, which are essential to mastering certain advanced professions.

Games can therefore teach the important lesson that learning is a two-way process.

As a concluding remark for this section, it is also important to mention that knowledge creation and exchange spills out of the game. Many players create Web sites containing important information about game quests, for instance; others learn about game concepts by talking in online forums. These outside resources are part and parcel of the social learning a player must go through.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that online games have become complex social spaces. Playing a game is about more than mindlessly killing monsters: it is about being socialized in a community, which in turn offers many opportunities for social learning. Through our observations we have begun to show where, when and how players can learn about interpersonal skills in MMORPGs. We argue that many of those skills could usefully translate to the real world, and that games are interesting platforms for players to experiment with interaction techniques. We hope these observations could be used either to encourage more social learning in current games, or to build games entirely dedicated to social learning.

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