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Video Games and Social Relation

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<p style="text-align:center">Video Games and Social Relations</p>

As a gamer, I have been playing video games for many years. And it has been a great entertainment in my daily life. Video games, with decades of development and revolution, has already become a unique culture with an enormous player base. As a part of the pop culture, it was first designed to fulfill people's need for entertainment. Just like other forms of entertainment, such as movies or drama, video game is also gradually becoming a form of art which is acknowledged by more and more people. Using computer programming, game developers have created countless astonishing worlds and lively characters. You can take part in the great Normandy landing and fight for your freedom on the Omaha beach; you can kill zombies on an alien planet wearing an exoskeleton armor; or you can play with Steven Curry in the NBA final and win the champion's title for the warrior. There are so many types or genres of video games that you can do anything in the game. Every single game may suit the standard for multiple types of games at the same time, meaning that each game has its unique gameplay experience. While we are amazed by its rapid improvement in technology, it is also gradually changing this society in another way.

Decades ago, people saw a video game as merely a method of entertainment. With its growing influence in the world, more and more people began to realize that it is more than a "game." Nowadays, it could also be a form of art, sports or media. From the history of the video game, we could see its trend of socialization. Although single-player experience is still an

important part in the video game market, more game developers have put their focus on the socializing aspects of the game. As for many players, playing a video game is a particular way for them to socialize with other players or friends. In my point of view, the video game itself could be seen as a unique form of community or social network which serves the same purpose that social media does. These communities connect players from all over the world with the same goal and interest. Or it could also serve as an approach to maintain a friendship with someone. Through playing video games, players could build and strengthen bonds with either their friends or people they know in the online communities.

Background

To research this topic, we have to know about video games at first. The definitions for game types have become ambiguous now since some games could be defined as different types by different people. Generally, we can divide it into two kinds – single-player games and multi-player games. Multi-player game means that a player has to corporate or compete with other players while single-player game creates a gameplay experience only for one person to enjoy. Comparing to single-player games, multi-player games usually have in-game communities where players are allowed to communicate within the game. In this case, multi-player games always encourage or require interaction and communication between players. Also, they usually have larger scale of online communities than single-player games. Obviously, it is easier to observe players' in-game behaviors and how these games promote social interaction in multi-player games. Of course, single-player games have their communities as well. Although players are not playing together online, they could also engage in all forms of communities with others for sharing the same interest and values. They could get in touch and build a connection using all

kinds of media. For most video games with a certain number of players, there could be fan pages or discussion forum for players to communicate and socialize with other players. This type of community exists in most video games no matter if it is a multi-player or single-player game. However, players could find themselves easier to interact with other players in multi-player games for they have provided a platform for players to communicate in the game. In my research, I want to focus mainly on multi-player games. I will investigate in players' different in-game behaviors and interaction with others. I want to evaluate the intention and motive behind those behaviors. Also, I will be looking into the specific traits of video games that encourage and help social interactions between players.

Among all kinds of multi-player games, I want to specify a particular type – the MMORPGs. MMORPG is the brief for massive multi-player online role-playing game. This type of game often has an open world environment with the potential to hold as many players as possible in the server. It represents a persistent, collaborative, and never-ending online multi-player game where all players can access a vast virtual world simultaneously (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014). MMORPG is the most direct demonstration of online communities of video games. Players are entering the same virtual world while playing the game. Unlike others, worlds in MMORPGs continuously exists in the server even if players are offline. In a word, these could be seen as permanent virtual worlds created by codes as long as the servers do not shut down. And they usually have their own systems of the time, weather and season. MMORPG has a high market value and influence in both society and the history of video games. The most famous MMORP game – the world of Warcraft has a cumulative revenue of 4 billion dollars by 2014 (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014). In 2011, it hosted no less than 12 million players at its peak (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015).

Many companies try to make an MMORPG game because of its unique charm of creating a society which holds thousands of players at the same time. For example, Elder Scroll and Final Fantasy are two successful single-players game series with more than ten years' history. But they have both released their MMORPG-versions in 2013 and 2014. The success of MMORPG does not only inspire game companies but has contributed to the high quality of social contact permitted between players as well (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014). It largely depends on MMORPGs' capacity to provide a space for players to bond, to learn from each other and experienced together, to make friends, and gain reputation (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). In my research, I will look into the features of MMORPGs which promote social interaction and form virtual community along with players' behavior and mentality. Also, I will examine how these features apply to multi-player games in general.

Game Mechanics

These games usually designed their system and mechanics to support and encourage communication between players. First of all, the basic functions of these games satisfy all the requirement for communication between players. You can always use text messages or in-game voice to talk to players. In order to make the communication easier, most games have introduced the "guild system." Some games may call it clan, club or tribe depending on the background story of the game. Gamers form guilds that are important components of online game culture; gamers mingle with other players and manage a virtual association to practice their game skills and enjoy collaborative battles against other clans. (Lee at el, 2011). These are permanent teams which players could join by application or invitation. This guild system is similar to the club we have in college. Typically, there might be president, vice presidents, administrators, and club

members. Guilds usually have their unique events and rewards to attract players to join and participate in exclusive activities. As for guild members, this system provides a platform for them to find teammates more easily. Also, it is a perfect way for them to connect to people they know in real life. Guilds function as several small communities existing in a vast virtual world. Within one community, there will be different roles played by different players. Just like I mentioned before, there will be a guild leader assigning tasks to his/her members. During a mission, there will be a commander giving orders to other players in the team. These roles are usually played by skilled and experienced players who help and guide new players to get better in the game. In a connected community, actors learn from their neighbor's choice and tend to subsequently choose the same actions (Fang at el, 2019). In the gaming society, players' behavior is also greatly influenced by other players in the network. New players would tend to watch and learn how veteran players play in a battle. And an experienced player will usually act as a teacher and leader to help rookies to improve their skills and get familiar with the game mechanics. This is a common process for a rookie in MMORPG to learn the game. Guild plays a vital role in helping rookies to improve while finding friends and socializing with other players.

"Role-Playing" – 2 different definitions

RPG is the terminology in video games representing "Role-Playing Games." MMORPGs will always provide different roles for players to choose from. Usually, they would offer multiple professions at the beginning of the game. In the game World of Warcraft, for example, players will have to first pick a side between "The Alliance" and "The Horde." Then they will need to choose a race and a class. However, there are 22 races and 12 classes (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019). Each race has several classes available, meaning that there are over 100 possible

combinations of race and class. Also, each race or class has its area of expertise. In most MMORPG games, including WOW, players usually assess the ability of a character on multiple aspects: "Tankiness," "DPS," healing, utility or etc. Generally, "Tankiness" describes the ability of a character to take damage for your teammates and draw the attention of the enemies. "DPS" stands for "damage per second," which is a measurement for a character's efficiency in damage output. Healing is simply healing or shielding your teammates. Utility represents the characters' ability to grant beneficial effect to teammates or negative effect on enemies such as movement speed boost to teammates and stunning the enemies. All aspects are significant during a fight in the game. Every race or class has its advantages and disadvantages. The profession system is always designed so that no one could have the perfect ability in game. In order to have a balance on the overall ability, players need to find someone who could fill in the weak side. On account of that, it is vital for them to corporate with other players with different professions to achieve the maximum potential of their team. In this case, finding suitable teammates is significant in trying to finish the mission. Players will frequently look for players to form a stronger team. In WOW and other MMORPGs, this is also a major motive for players to join a guild. Being a member of a guild will make it more convenient to find teammates to play together.

In the general definition of "role-playing," players will play as assigned roles and take responsibility in fictional worlds. The traditional understanding of Role-playing Games, however, is different from the definition. In the video game market, a RPG usually involve the specific numerical data of the in-game characters. In traditional RPGs, especially MMORPGs, players will have to level up and boost their characters to gain better abilities throughout the gameplay. The profession system in WOW is a perfect illustration of a RPG game. WOW has character levels from 1 to 120, and each character's detailed abilities will be measured by

numbers. Although only a certain amount of games with features as mentioned earlier could be defined as RPGs, many other multi-player games also involve "role-playing" elements.

GTAOL is popular multi-player games with a good reputation. The game has designed an enormously virtual city named "Los Santos" which is based on Los Angeles. This virtual city is created so alive that the game itself is an absolute masterpiece in game history. The game has time and weather system based on real life and has countless NPCs (Non-player characters) living their lives. There are policemen, military soldiers, grocery store owners, pedestrians, drug dealers, etc. In the game, players play as criminals who could rob banks or stores, run a club, or even fight with the police. Although being an incredibly realistic world, the game design has limited players' action to be criminals who make a fortune by doing illegal business. But there is a fan-made mode which makes the game even more similar to a real city.

In the role-playing mode of GTAOL, players can choose whoever they want to be. They could be policeman, businessman, bank robber, or thug member. The rule of these role-playing servers is that every player has to behave just like the role being selected. For example, a "robber" has to try to rob a store or bank and a "police officer" has to stop and arrest him. The purpose of the role-playing mode is to make the virtual world more alive by having every player to take the responsibility of the assigned role. Also, it is a way for players to experience a different life in this virtual world. While watching the city and people around functioning in a realistic way, players could feel a sense of community in the game. Because players are not along in the game and all the roles are closely connected (for example criminals and police officers), they will inevitably interact with other players. Also, players must keep communication with others during the game for they have to mimic their roles in every way, including their way to speak. Usually, they would use discord or other communication software. After a certain

period of time, they have also formed a large community on discord and other social media. When playing together as different roles, players have to take responsibility of their roles. In order words, they have a specific objective in the game – to be the roles they picked and become a part of the city. They will feel a strong sense of belonging to the community and sometimes even forget they are in the game. Moreover, players' frequent interaction will help them to know each other's personality and mindset. The shared experience and sense of belonging to the same world build up a connection between players and bring them even closer. Thus two communities, both in-game and offline, have been created with the same group of players.

The two definitions of "role-playing" have different expression in the game. The traditional RPGs put a limitation on in-game characters at the beginning of the game. In order for players to boost their roles and explore the game, they are forced to find teammates with all necessary means. Otherwise, they will experience an extremely difficult journey alone. The general use of "role-playing" creates a sense of community in the game by assigning everyone a role in the community. These two definitions are different but not contradictory. They could both exist in one single game. What is more important is that they both serve the same purpose – to motivate players to interact and enjoy the game with other players.

Difficulty of Games

Most MMORPG games design their gameplay to force players to team-up with others. In all MMORPG games and most multiplayer games, you are allowed and encouraged to team-up with other players to complete missions. Even more, some tasks or quests within MMORPGs are often designed in such a challenging manner that their achievement necessitates the organization

and cooperation of other players whether they are transitory social networks or more permanent clans (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014). In such activities, players have to either seek help from a guild or find teammates using other methods. In most circumstances, a guild would be the best choice. Therefore, players routinely form, engage in, and complete tasks to gain acceptance, veneration, and power within a group or guild, and ultimately, aid this association to compete with, and defeat other groups as a means to attain the game's goal (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014).

This situation is quite similar to a game I played several months before. The game is called The Division which is also considered as a MMORPG. Slightly different with other traditional MMORPGs, players could choose to play this game either in single-player mode or with other players in this game. Due to the technical limitation, the server cannot hold too many players at the same time, meaning that one can only play with a certain number of players at the same time. Although you can play all the mission by yourself, most players still chose to play in a group to challenge greater difficulty in order to win a better prize. However, most players would use the match-making system in the game. This is system will randomly assign strangers to your team to finish the mission together. And many players chose not to communicate with their teammates since they barely knew each other. In an update, the game introduced a new mission that changed this situation. This new mission is called Raid, which was designed so challenging that it was almost impossible to be finished by a team lack of teamwork and communication. Expecting the shock from player community, the game development team explained that their intention was to push players to coordinate and communicate with other players in the game instead of playing solo. In their announcement to the players, it said "Go find new friends or join a clan". In this case, they even canceled matchmaking system for this mission.

Although many players were unpleasant with this change for they have to invite players they know to join their games, most of them did exactly what the game wanted them to do. Since the difficulty of this task requires eight players to cooperate, most of the players could not find enough friends to team-up. So they began to look for teammates using all kinds of methods. They use social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or game discussion forums to find players with similar skill level. In order to complete the mission, they had to use in-game voice or discord to keep communicating with their teammates. I also participated in these events and found a group of teammates on a Chinese social website. Instead of having teammates randomly assigned by the system, I had to talk and invite player I found on social media. Though I only played several times with them due to the final week, I saw them talking with each other on group chat every day. They shared their experience in battle, offered tips for conquering the mission, and even discussed their daily life. This game and this special mission have gathered them together and connected them with the same goal. By playing this mission, they got a chance to know each other and become friends. Through their conversation online, I felt that they enjoyed socializing with players they knew in the game more than enjoying the game. This game has designed the mission to include the interaction between players as an indispensable part of the gameplay experience. Although this is quite an extreme example since they have canceled the matchmaking system at first, this still reflects the essence of MMORPGS which is to encourage and promote the social interaction between players within a virtual community.

Game Features on other Multi-Player Games

The same features also appliy to other multiplayer gamers other than MMORPGs. Because of the frequent social interaction in the game will keep players interest along with more

profit, a gaming company will always try to push players to socialize in the game. In most MMORPGs, the most efficient way is to create a virtual community in the game which provides players a sense of belonging. In other multi-player games, the gameplay may involve the features I have mentioned above to encourage or force players to team-up. Some games even have their own designs for encouraging social behaviors.

In Mario Odyssey released on Nintendo Switch in 2017, developers have used a similar concept in designing their gameplay – to promote interaction between players. Different from MMORPGs which creates virtual communities in the game, Mario Odyssey could be considered as a single-player game with a local multi-player mode. The story of the game is quite simple – you have to control Mario to defeat the big villain Bowser. But Nintendo has shown greater creativity in encouraging players to play with one another. They have designed the multi-player mode to have better and more interesting control of the game character. If you are playing with a friend, one needs to control Mario while the other control his hat. This special design of control gives multi-player mode a higher potential to use different combos, thus having more creativity and happiness. Unlike MMORPGs which push the players to socialize with other online players, Mario Odyssey targets on encouraging a player to achieve more possibility with a friend or family member. And many players do experience stronger relations by playing this game together. While MMORPGs design their missions to be challenging so that players will spontaneously look for teammates, Mario makes its control more attractive in multi-player mode. The purpose of these two types of the game may be different. MMORPGs want players to participate in social activities and become a member of the virtual community. Mario is used as an approach to strengthen the relationship with a close one. The concept of their game design,

however, is the same for both Mario and MMORPGs, which is to award players cooperation behaviors and motivate them to enjoy the game with other players.

Players' Motivation

The game mechanic is one factor in influencing players' social behaviors in the game. Nevertheless, there are also motivations in players' inner selves that push them to socialize and interact with others. To know about video games' impact on the player's social relations, we also have to analyze the mentality and mindset of the players.

MMORPG and Player Psychology

In an article which defines MMORPG as complicated brand tribalism, the authors also analyze the players' in-game actions using the psychological method. They mentioned a concept proposed by a researcher. They divide players into four major categories: killers, explorers, achievers, and socializers (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014). Players start the game as "killer" who primarily engage in activities directed at other players and participate in events. And then they become "explorers" as they begin to interact with the game environment actively and learn more about the virtual world. Their actions are driven by the curiosity to know about the world they "live in." With growing familiarity, players become "achievers" who focus on empowering their in-game characters. After all the advancement slows down, players become "socializers" and spend most of their time interacting with other players in the communities. This concept perfectly describes players' four stages of their state of mind while playing MMORPG. The order of the four stages may not apply to all players. For example, some players may choose to explore the world when he first enters the game. Although different players will have a different

process, most of them will go through these four stages. Each stage represents their particular interest in the game during that period of time and may reflect their needs or desire while playing the game. An explorer has the desire to know about a new world. An achiever may project himself/herself on the character he/ she creates in the game. The process of empowering the game character is also improving himself/herself. And the socializer shows that socializing with different players is also significant in MMORPG. In fact, most player needs to interact with others to keep a feeling of freshness to the game. Also, continuous socialization makes them feel that the game world is alive. Thus, it will create a sense of belonging to not only the game but also the online community.

In a study by William Lee in 2007, he proposed three motivations of MMORPG players: "achievement," "social," and "immersion." Achieve motivation represents players desire to advance in-game, gain skills and expertise, and become stronger and stronger. "A social motivation engendered socializing with players and making friends, building personal and mutually supportive relationships, and collaborating with others to achieve group outcomes (Badrinarayanan at el, 2014)." Immersion means that players are interested in exploring new game components, customization, and projection of their virtual selves. He clearly indicated that having a connection with other players is the main factor to motivate players to spend time in the virtual world. Moreover, the "immersion" motivation is also somehow related to social factor. While players talk about "immersive experience" in video games, players should have a sense that the world within the game is living and working in its own way. The purpose is to make players feel that they are living in another world instead of playing games.

GTAOL is a perfect demonstration of immersive gameplay. The creator of this fan-made mode said they wanted players to immerse in the characters they choose in the game. They hope players could not only "play" the roles but also "be" the roles. In fact, many players join this mode for seeking immersive experience in a virtual city. However, part of the "immersion" motivation automatically transfer to a desire for socializing. Because the interaction between different people is the essential of a society. In order to feel a stronger connection to the virtual world and community, players will spontaneously look for opportunities to interact with other players. Player could feel that they are not alone in the virtual world and there is always someone else living in this world, playing their roles and communicating with them. The constant social interaction helps them to connect to the virtual world, thus creating a sense of "immersion."

In fact, the Four stages and Three motivations of gamers in the previous discussion could be considered as two primary desire – entertainment and social contact. In a study on online entertainment communities, researchers found that continued participation in online entertainment communities is driven by a joint impact of both entertainment and community aspects (Deng at el, 2013). In an analysis of motivation on the popular mobile games Pokémon Go, the authors identified seven factors of motivation including fun, Nostalgia, Friendship maintenance, relationship initiation. "Entertainment" and "Social Relation" (Yang at el, 2017). Even for a mobile game with multi-player elements, entertainment, and social relation are two important factors. In fact, the two aspects are not fully separated but rather related. For many multi-player gamers, their pursuit of entertainment will also involve the inevitable need for social interaction, or their desire to socialize is embedded in their definition of entertainment.

The Use of Video games in Social Relation

In the research on Pokémon Go, researchers mentioned two parts of video game's impact on social relations – relationship initiation and friendship maintenance. Both aspects are significant in the player's social relations as well as mine. In my previous discussion, I have focused on how video games encourage players to establish a new relationship with other players. And video game has played a decisive role in my process of starting a romantic relationship with my girlfriend. Although we have known each other for three years in college, we never had a chance to know each other further until we began to play a popular multi-player game together. In fact, neither of us were really interested in the game itself. But the game has provided us a platform for connection. By playing together, observing behaviors and communications in the game, we began to know each other. And many positive or negative characteristics could be noticed during the process. The way you treat your teammates and opponents, how you handle your own misplays or even mood swings during the game could be the reflection of your true personality. We have seen the highlights in each other's personality during weeks of playing together. Moreover, studies on online games have suggested potential benefits in terms of creating a closeness, friendship, and belonging, especially when linking online and offline relationships (Hanghøj, 2018). Playing a video game together brought us closer and let us know others better. It also applies to the general relationship between players. Multi-player game is a platform which reflects a person's value and personality as well as connects players with same experience and interest.

Besides initiating new relationship, video game is also an efficient way to keep the connection with someone you already knew in real life. As a popular entertainment, most people

are now familiar with video games. Multi-player game is a useful approach to keep in contact with a close one. Social online gaming could help to strengthen preexisting friendships by providing a shared focus of activity (Domahidi at el, 2018). Especially for teenagers, playing certain video games has become a powerful socializing agent among young people (Muros at el, 2013). As for people who are working or actively seeking for jobs, occasionally playing with friends will help you to keep the connection between you and your friends. After graduating and beginning to work, there is only limited time every day to stay in touch with old friends from high school or college. Playing online games is probably one of the most efficient methods to maintain friendship along with taking a break from the busy work.

Conclusion

Most multi-player games have designed their games to include social interaction as an essential part of the gameplay. They have developed features and mechanics to support and encourage such interactions. Guild system, profession system, and role-playing are all demonstrations of their intention to boost the player's motivation in socializing. Of course, there are plenty of more game designs that serve the same purpose. Pushed by both games and their own needs for socializing, players actively engage in the activities and interactions with other players to gain acceptance and sense of belonging to the communities. Multi-player helps players to find and build new relationships as well as maintaining pre-existing ones. In order to catch up with the revolution of technology and society, we have to know and accept it as an emerging form of social media with great impact on social relations.

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