We should be heroes… A case study of community building as a dominant strategy

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Introduction

Once upon a time in a not so distant galaxy a game researcher ventured into the world of persistent multiplayer games. He was not really there for the social stuff but loved strategy games – looking back two years later; he realized that he had been trapped. The cynical game researcher that had previously laughed at miserable people, cruel fates being caught up in online communities was no longer laughing at other online players' strong attachments to online communities.

During the years he experienced the destruction of his first clan, the hope for a better place in a new clan, which he was forced to turn his back on due to the outside world's pressure. Missing the game too much he descended once again into the game that would probably hardly qualify as a sub-quest in World of Warcraft in development hours: The graphics crude, the technical solutions hopeless, management a nightmare, and cheaters too often soup of the day. Sure, the game was free but that hardly made up for the problems. So, why did so many play it, and

continuously failed to leave it? Many of those who left swearing not to return came back - only to find the same ugly graphics, bugs, cheaters, and a long list of other problems.

My starting point is that the game pulled people back because community building and playing the game was closely intermingled. The game developed so community building became the most important criteria for winning. Achieving community building as a complex part of the gameplay made the simplicity of the core game less important – the building of a community was enough challenge.

This paper argues that slowly the simple gameplay led to the emergence of a number of structures that supported community building, and changed the gameplay. The link between gameplay and community is examined by looking at the most important gameplay mechanics, and how the successful engagement with these mechanics is dependent on a strong community. A strong community became the main strategy for winning the game although of course other skills were also needed. The importance of social interactions and community in MMORPGs is hardly unknown however I believe that I can bring something new to the table by showing an even closer relationship between community and gameplay than most MMORPGs like Everquest (Jakobsson and Taylor 2003)

The empirical data comes from 2½ years of playing Heroes regularly for 5-20 hours a week in three different clans. I have not revealed my research interest as I only recently decided to write this paper because I felt Heroes was an interesting example of a simple online game where gameplay emerged with close ties to community building.

It is always quite hard to use a computer game that few really know. To really get to my discussions I need to describe the game in some detail. Although a bit cumbersome, I feel that there may be an extra benefit to such a game description. It may move the light away from the huge mainstream multimillion dollars Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games that tend to

dominate game research, game market, and the game industry (Eladhari 2003). A tendency that has recently been challenged by game guru Raph Koster pointing to the example of RuneScape (Ruberg, 2007). RuneScape is also a quite simple massively multiplayer online game. A description, of an in many ways amateurish persistent turn-based multiplayer online game, may be one way to open our eyes to the real strengths of online games that is so easily lost in what seems an endless stream of clones within the MMORPG genre. An endless upgrading of graphics and more complexity but seldom changes in the underlying gameplay assumptions. You still level up by slaying monsters while exploring an online world. I believe that the number of less pricey online games that focuses more on gameplay than graphics may have a lot to offer. For example the Swedish soccer management Hattrick game is just about to reach 1.000.000 active players worldwide showcasing some interesting gameplay innovations.

Game description

The Danish text-based, turn-based online strategy game called Heroes is basically set in a Viking universe, although the direct references inside the game universe are very few both in gameplay, text and visuals – the theme plays a minor role. Still, The Viking universe plays a role for many Danes as the golden age of honour, loyalty, and valour. The Viking setting influences the construction of the game's tacit rules that are continuously discussed and negotiated. It also frames the social interactions. For example you have inns where players meet to drink mead like the Vikings did. The names of clans and tribes are also inspired by Viking mythology.

The gameplay of Heroes is inspired by Utopia, which is a US-based online game with 80.000+ players. Heroes currently has 3500 active Danish players (2009 numbers). An active player is one that has logged in within the last month. After one month a player is automatically deleted. The number of players may not seem very large but it is quite big considering the Danish population is only 5 millions. If we assume that World of Warcraft

has a market of 800 million potential users this would mean that Heroes on the same market would relatively speaking have 560.000 players.

The game has never been commercially marketed, and can be described as gaming subculture. It is in opposition to what most mainstream computer games stand for. It doesn't focus on graphics, sound, and development happens randomly with game mechanics slowly evolving. The evolution from predecessors like Utopia is still quite profound witnessed by the fact that playing Utopia is certainly not the same experience as playing Heroes. Over the years the two games have moved in different directions.

The players are made up of practically all layers of society from 11-year-old school kids to 50 year old family fathers playing with their entire family in the game. However, there is still an overabundance of young males. The game has 90% male players, and an average age of 22 years. Each player has a tribe that is part of a clan with a democratically selected chief and supporting management. The clan usually consists of 25 to 55 tribes that more or less work together. You can make official alliances with other clans. A game will last for app. 1½ months with all players starting from scratch except old players keep their tribe's id and may stay in the same clan with their tribe.

The game is quite simple on the surface, giving you one turn each ½ hour that you can use for building infrastructure, raiding opponents, sending reinforcements, building troops, or attacking other tribes. You can only save up to 150 turns equal to approximately being online every third day. An action is usually performed by writing a number, and clicking a link.

You can attack other tribes at any point in time as long as you have more than 200 warriors. However, usually your clan picks a time for a raid, where as many tribes as possible meet up and attack an enemy clan together. Usually you need to reach a certain level to make raids worthwhile including spending money raising an army compared to building your infrastructure. In terms of gameplay, the raids are the essence of the game experience,

where everybody is online at the same time. The activity levels at popular raid times bring up to 50% of all tribes in the entire game online making the servers lag severely. The lag is no small accomplishment considering the game is text-based and clicking a hyperlink performs your actions.

The importance of raiding

The best indication of how strong a clan is in Heroes is the raid performance. A raid is a set time for fighting another clan usually announced a couple of days in advance. The raid is the single most challenging aspect of the game, and it makes or breaks a clan. The raid can take a number of forms from one-hour raid with peace afterwards to daylong wars, or ultimately war for the rest of the game round. You can seldom win a raid if you are out-gunned by more than a few tribes. Still, a strong turnout can sway the battle your way, and is hence extremely important.

The importance of raid activity is witnessed by an evolution towards producing user-generated structures to get the highest turnout and coordinate attacks. A rooster list has been implemented for people to sign up for a raid on the forum, and tribes are expected to have a certain turn-out percentage for a game round (1½ month). All clans use an outside chat forum to communicate during a raid to insure collaboration and timing.

Raids have historically not always been a part of the game. Initially tribes just attacked other tribes more or less without coordination. There were no common enemy, no alliances, and no shared agenda. However, slowly it became clear that a coordinated effort was a clear advantage. So raids came into being, and are now the dominate way of fighting. This is a clear example of a quite complex emergence phenomenon, where new complex ways of playing emerged with matching user-generated game structures (Juul 2002; Johnson 2001). Because raids became so important a number of other structures emerged to support the raid activity, and raids became so important that they form the entire game's focus leading the game towards a focus on community building. To ensure the power of raid you really

had to maintain a strong community with turnout, collaboration, altruism and discipline, which will be explored in the following.

When looking at successful raids, they rely on the following four characteristics: activity level, game experience, sense of community, and group cohesion. The importance of the four characteristics is agreed on by most players in the game. It is hard to explain exactly why the four characteristics are the most important for raiding, and ultimately the game, to outsiders, but I will try to present a few arguments. First of all, raids are intense, confusing, and call for good nerves. You need to have game experience and group cohesion to deal with the changing tides during a raid, and know what to do. A raiding clan that doesn't coordinate, stay online when brought down by the enemy, wait patiently for counter-attacks, listen to the chief, help other tribes, or keep the morale high will not make it to the top. They can easily lose even if they have more tribes than an opponent.

Another important aspect is the activity level that decides how many really turn up for the raid. This is important because it initially gives your clan the upper-hand. To have a high turn out percentage over time, all tribes need to prioritize the clan highly. Other real life events that collide with raids must be cancelled, as the enemy clan is not about to wait for you to turn up fighting. There seems to be two possible explanations for tribes dedicating themselves to the stiff demands of raids. The first is, of course, the desire to win the game, which is the common goal that all tribes work towards, and this dynamic is well-known from most computer games (Zimmerman and Salen 2003; Bartle 1996; Juul 2003). However, this is, in my experience, not the convincing argument, when dinners are cut short, holidays cancelled, or parties left early. The chances of winning the game 1½ months later are too abstract and far away for most clans . Furthermore the desire to win is not really something that you can work to improve directly. A desire to win is personally motivating for a player but community building is a way to transform the winning instinct to a higher cause.   The most important tool for securing

high raid participation in Heroes constantly turns out to be community building.

A loyalty, sense of obligation to the clan, and social relations with other players will get tribes to flock to raids. The consequences of failure to show up are way beyond just winning or not. Other clan members will express disappointment and resentment towards other tribes for letting them down. It is like you have abandoned your obligations to the family. More often than not, failing to come to a raid will result in the player being kicked out of the clan. The secondary importance of winning is also evidenced by the behavior after raids. When you lose a raid with a good turn-out the tribes usually feel the clan represented itself well, and the tribes fought for each other. However, winning a raid with a bad turn-out will not result in a positive atmosphere but rather resignation among tribes.

The overall significance of the four parameters on the entire game's balance is supported by the top-clans being made up of a close-knitted number of experienced tribes with high activity. Many of these clans use real life parties to gather people in the clan from throughout Denmark. The most extreme tribes will stay online for days at a time – in a memorable round, one clan (Alfheim) fought off smaller clans ganging up on them by splitting their clan in two. The tribes then took turns so half the clan was always online for 48 hours straight.

The good clans can coordinate close to 100% turnout in the middle of the night with 2 days of warning. This shows a dedication and persistence beyond most activities I know of. The forum threads in most clans are also oriented towards securing the four characteristics. You have an inn where people can drink mead and hang out. You have different threads for showing activity level like jokes, word games, player real life info, honor warrior contest, and clan debate. These have little or no bearing on the game experience but bring players closer together, and check activity level.

It has turned out that to know the right strategy is easier that building a working clan community. A strong sense of community has become the characteristic that sets the top-clans apart from other clans. You need to create a strong community in a clan for players to turn up for raids, maintain high activity levels, keep tacit rules, and sacrifice personal winnings for the common good.

You can have the best of strategies for a clan but if the tribes fail on the soft parameters above you will never reach top-10. Therefore strategy is. if not replaced, then severely limited by a clan's ability to nurture game experience, group cohesion, sense of community, and activity level through the clan community. Ultimately the four success criteria are all tied to a strong community, which is further discussed below.

What is a community

Above I have claimed that the four characteristics of a strong clan are ultimately based on the clan's ability to work as a strong community. I will try to define a bit closer what makes up a community before giving more examples of the role community plays in the game.

Etienne Wenger (1999) defines a community as consisting of three central pillars: Mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. The mutual engagement refers to a shared commitment latent in relation toward a given activity. It is not enough merely to be physically located together or be interested in the same topic. The engagement has to be connected in a rich and meaningful way. You also have to share an understanding of how to go about a certain enterprise to which you share some relationship.

In this online game the obvious joint enterprise is to obtain the highest position on the clan list. The winner of the game is the clan with the highest total score for all of its tribes. The repertoire a tribe needs to really be an asset to a clan is varied and huge. On the surface , the game is quite simple but becomes extremely complex because most of the game is really negotiated between players and their tacit knowledge. The demands clans make on

new tribes are quite far away from the game rules, and are not immediately recognizable for the newbie. The game is impossible to learn if it is played without help from experienced players. The following example will help illustrate this claim. The alliances system in the game code only consists of 8 visible alliances. However this has turned out to be far from enough to handle the complexity of the game. Therefore players have designed elaborate non-aggression pact treaties with different notice warnings . The open alliances have also been supplemented with secret alliances that are only visible to the chief of a clan, and the concept of round peace is similarly used. Round peace means that you commit yourself to not attacking a clan for the rest of a play round (1½ month). For all of these diplomatic options, there are no official game options for enforcing a punishment, and the alliances are not described anywhere, including the official rules.

A clan can choose to break a treaty, and similarly a single tribe can choose to do so without immediate consequences. A displeased tribe or a newbie tribe can often result in the entire clan being at war without warning. Most treaties will have a 5:1 or 3:1 counter-attack as punishment to a breach of a treaty. However, this is not possible to enforce as such. It has to be on gentleman's basis, which as you might have guessed leads to constant problems: Bickering on who started a war, what the punishment should be, and whether one sold out an alliance. All these are regular occurrences.

Inherit in the implicit rules and tacit knowledge lies a slow building of a shared repertoire concerning how a clan does things. What is acceptable, and what is not. This repertoire is through mutual engagement used in the joint enterprise. The significance of a strong community where the clan works as a unit is illustrated by looking at the role of common good and equality in the game. It is important that the entire community recognize the importance of common good and equality.

Most online games have implemented common good and quality quite poorly. Most MMORPGs have little equality between

players because the persistent world easily leads to low-level players having little value for high-level players. The problem manifests itself in different ways with the broader problem of some people becoming useless in online worlds. However, there should be a place for the newbie, casual gamer, hardcore gamer, or any other major player type (Baron 2004). Heroes achieves this by making both newbie and expert players interested in the common good for the clan, and giving them tools to contribute equally well, although in different situations. In Heroes it is actually not rare for the best players (usually have higher scores) to have a peripheral role in a raid, and let the players with small tribes (usually worse players in the four characteristics mentioned earlier) do more of the fighting.

The common good

The dependency between low and high players is achieved through a number of game mechanics. One is sending troops to other tribes. This is a very strong weapon if you can trust other tribes not to attack you or use the warriors for wrong purposes. One tribe may use two turns to recruit 10.000 warriors because he has been winning in a raid, while another can only train 100 in two turns because the enemy has concentrated the attacks on him. It takes the big tribe one turn to send 20% of all of his warriors. The advantage is obvious although a few other matters need to be taken into consideration for it to work. The important point is that the players need to work together to achieve the best common good. This again requires a strong community, where you fight for the clan and trust other tribes to not misuse the warriors you sent. The misuse can be fatal, and have several times cost clans victories because a mole tribe turned on a clan during a crucial raid.

The dependency between low and high players is further supported by limits for attacks. A tribe can only attack other tribes that are either half their size or 2½ times larger than their size. This means that small tribes have an advantage because they can attack big tribes without the big tribes being able to attack back. The solution is that the small tribes in a given clan will hold

down an enemy clan's tribes from growing. The big tribes will send warriors to the small tribes because small tribes spend a considerably longer time training warriors. This requires a close collaboration to fight for the common good of the clan.

Also a small tribe could attack as big an opponent as possible but that is not in the clan's best interest because high tribes will be able to attack these. Therefore the small tribes leave these to the high tribes opening themselves even more to attacks from enemy tribes. However, drawing the fire from the big tribes is best for the common good. The large tribes can send warriors and sacrifice more gold to shared clan warriors (see below). Also when the big tribes attack an enemy tribe they can only get it down to a certain level where the enemy tribe can then attack back. Here you need to coordinate with some of the clan's smaller tribes to insure the complete downfall of an enemy tribe .

Another common good incentive and a strong facilitator for the sense of community is that each tribe can sacrifice gold to the entire clan, and thereby buy warriors that the entire clan shares. The warriors bought by the clan automatically fight for all tribes and can't die but are way more expensive than tribe warriors. A tribe's warrior only fights for himself and will die during raids. The gold you sacrifice as a tribe to the clan could have been used to buy your own warriors, getting you a better score. The clan warriors are a kind of safe deposit for the entire clan's future standing and raid strength. Even if you lose a raid you will have a minimum of clan warriors to help you back to the top. The clans that sacrifice will outlast other clans, but for tribes to sacrifice they need to be convinced of the advantages, which helps them feel a stronger relation to the clan than their own tribe. The sacrifices are very important and many clans give out the title "master of sacrifices" after each round to promote sacrificing.

Overall a clan needs to support a strong community for the tribes to stay active, collaborate, maintain group cohesion, and sense of community. This is of course especially hard when the game is going against a clan, when you lose a raid, several players quit

the clan, or activity level plummets. This is where a clan community shows its strength - strong clans can come untouched through an entire round with severe beatings because of a strong community - Untouched in the sense that they still have the same strong clan on the basic four characteristics. Strong clans like Last Klan Standing, Skrymers Vante, and Woodan Kulten have taken these bungee jump trips from between the top-5 clans to being the bottom-5 in next round. This can also happen during a round, where you take the trip on the clan list from high to low back to high. Clans that survive such a round will in the next round be even stronger, and more feared by other clans.

The vulnerability of even the strongest clans points to another important point, namely that a number of small clans (consisting of tribes with low scores) will be a severe threat to any clan. A top-clan's worse nightmare is to get into raids where a top clan gangs up on them with some smaller clans that continue to keep them down during the rest of the round. Such a favor is of course returned in future rounds, both on the giving and receiving end.

Equality rules
I mentioned that equality is quite important in Heroes, and this also supports the importance of community building. The newbie and low score tribe is potentially of as great a value as an experienced player due to the factors explained above. After each 1½ month round, the newbie will start with the same game stats. There is no difference whatsoever. The difference lies in id number, game experience, and activity level. Of course, the newbie needs to learn how to play: build up tribe, whom to attack during raid, micro strategies to supplement clan strategies, keep a cool head during raid, and a number of other specifics. In general the expert players are characterized by an ability to recognize the important from the not so important. This fits nicely with Lave & Wenger's (1991) definition of old-timers in a community.

More importantly, equality implies that all tribes have an interest in teaching new tribes to play and to assist tribes with low scores

– their clan's success will depend on it, and ultimately also their own security. The importance of introducing new players is evidenced by the evolution of a minister in all clans responsible for welcoming and helping new tribes.

The importance of both newbies and low score tribes makes for a very close-knit and homogenous game universe quite different from MMORPGs. As the game progresses, quite big differences between tribes and clans will occur but importantly they both have weak and strong sides as explained above. The equality facilitates a strong community building, where everybody is welcome although somewhat distrusted. Also, the amount of tacit rules in the game calls for a strong community. Rules and knowledge of the game are shared and distributed to new tribes that are deemed worthy. Usually worthiness comes from showing signs of activity, commitment to the clan, and interest in learning more. You will always get the first pointers as a newbie but will not be let into the most sacred until you are seen as part of the clan community.

All tribes are equal but those that have experience, are active, and have been in the clan for a long time have a higher standing in the community. They present the social expectations to new tribes. These are formulated in a set of rules that guide a clan, and failure to live up to them will lead to exile from the clan. The rules usually include an obligation to be active by participating in forums and raids. You also need to live up to the clans obligations towards other clans like non-aggression pacts and alliances.

Here the sense of community is also crucial to impart rules early on to newbies as you need to ensure that the rules are held and expectations met. A clan does not really have a lot of options for punishing a tribe in the game. You can ultimately expel him from the clan but that will mean that you loose a tribe, which is really as much a punishment for the clan as the tribe.

Overall there is a tremendous interest from expert players to train newbies and to attach them to a clan. The newbies must become skilled and part of the clan community. It however also leads to

quite strong demands on activity level towards players, which is one of the biggest problems in the game. You need to be online at specific times and not miss raids, which in the long run excludes a lot of people. However, this somewhat depends on the ambition level of the clan you are in. In the top clans each tribe dedicates their life to the game, and the chief and management of a clan is a fulltime job. However, smaller clans have other ambitions and expectations that make room for more casual players. In that way there is still different options for playing.

The strong sense of community is also evidenced by some players going to extremes, getting banned for death threats or trying to beat up other players in real-life. This is of course not the most common of actions, but on the extreme end. However, it is obvious that the in-game conflicts have a very high intensity not explained by simply winning the game. Clans will forge alliances over the years and will break some, leading to bitter fights, flaming, backstabbing, and nagging on the public forum.

Conclusion

Like most online games, the community structures are not really a part of the computer game's code but are user-generated by using different external tools (Steinkuehler 2004). It is likewise in Heroes where the community is represented in a variety of ways. It is a living, breathing creature present everywhere in the game. The structures are mainly communicated through chat, instant messaging, mails, and forums with the ultimate goal of increasing the chance of winning the game through a strong community. The heroes in the game are those that sacrifice everything for the clan.

I have presented some examples of how different game mechanisms have led to the emergence of community building as the most important skill in the game. Although strategy still plays a role in many gameplay decisions, the success of these rests on a foundation made up of the degree to which the clan community works. A strategy cannot be implemented without a decent

activity level, sense of community, group cohesion, and game experience. All of these depend on the community, and can't be achieved by a player by himself.

On a last note, the implications of a game like Heroes points to a potentially benign socialization of players that learn to think in terms of equality, common good, and the community. This is also in stark contrast to popular media representations of online games but potentially also other MMORPGs. In Everquest collaborations and community may help you, but ultimately the game rests on players growing godly powers.

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