

The Sopranos Meets EverQuest Social Networking in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways social interaction plays an integral role in the game EverQuest. Through our research we argue that social networks form a powerful component of the gameplay and the gaming experience, one that must be seriously considered to understand the nature of massively multiplayer online games. We discuss the discrepancy between how the game is portrayed and how it is actually played. By examining the role of social networks and interactions we seek to explore how the friendships between the players could be considered the ultimate exploit of the game.

KEYWORDS

game studies, MMORPG, MMOG, EverQuest, social interaction, social networks

GREATER FAYDARK OR GREATER NEWARK?

When Mikael first entered the virtual world of the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) EverQuest (EQ), he started out thinking that it would be how it is described in the manual, that the most important tasks would be to do some initial quests to get some things to wear that slightly improved his character's statistics. He thought he would spend most of the time alone, fighting low level creatures for a long time before becoming of interest to the other players of the game. Secretly he nursed a vision of finally revealing himself to the community once he had become truly powerful, similar to the way Gandalf returns in the second book (or should we say film) of Tolkien's Middle-earth trilogy. Certainly the game manual, indeed the game mythology itself, helped foster this image of a lone brave explorer fighting ferocious creatures and perfecting his skills.

These expectations, however, soon proved to be based on several misconceptions. Despite first impressions of the game and indeed despite what one might gather from much of the written material, there is a more important layer of activity to consider for successful life in the world of EQ. The first misconception was that it is the abilities of the character you develop within the game that is the primary deciding factor for your status within the community. While the manual for instance

says "when starting a party, consider the skills of each member that you invite," factors that are not mentioned in the manual, like connections and reputation, are at least equally important. The manual additionally advises against mentioning twentieth century technology, phenomena and customs, encouraging players to restrict their use of out of character (ooc) comments. The fact of the matter is, however, that these guidelines are generally overlooked and signs of actual role-playing are few and far between [23]. Indeed, aside a designated role-play server, the EQ world regularly bleeds over into the physical world, and vice versa. The very idea that one can distinctly inhabit ooc- and in-character space has become fairly rare.

While Mikael was completely new to EQ at the beginning of this study, T.L. was already a chastened veteran, having played the game for several years. Upon first meeting inside the game T.L. started out by handing over some items that greatly improved Mikael's abilities to kill creatures, as well as a sum of money that was very substantial compared to what he was able to make at that level. This conduct is known as twinkling but when Mikael worried that others might perceive him as a cheater, T.L. assured him that he only had been mildly twinkled compared to many other newbies. Mikael would later realize that players even advertise that they are twinkled when looking for groups and that this way of taking short-cuts in developing ones character is, in most instances, accepted within the player community.

T.L. then informed Mikael that there were some people that he should meet. Mikael did not entirely understand the point of being introduced to these high-level long-time players that he was too inexperienced to hunt together with anyway, but T.L. insisted that they were not only very nice but also very useful people to know. As she introduced him to some of her friends he started to realize what it was all about. The thing that tipped him off was the way she chose to introduce him as "a RL [real life] friend" rather than just "a friend." This distinction made Mikael think of how the mafia supposedly introduce people as either "a friend of mine" if it is a normal friend or "a friend of ours" if he wants to signal that the person also is a member of "the family."

As more gifts and tips about the game came along with the introductions, Mikael slowly started to see the importance of the social networks inside the game. He saw that instead of having Gandalf as a role model, he would be better off trying to think as Tony Soprano, a present day mafia boss in New Jersey from the American TV show The Sopranos.

During the last decades, the mafia has been the topic of numerous TV shows, movies and books. Through popular culture the public has been given insight into how their social networks are constructed and maintained, how the participants benefit, as well as the dangers involved. Through this "common knowledge" we make use of classic mafia concepts such as trust, honor, silence, favors, reputation and "the family" to frame our description of social networking in EQ. These ideas provide an easy access point into understanding processes that may be unfamiliar due to their context. When we claim that there is a close parallel to be drawn here, it is the deep connections, the social rituals, the insider/outsider status, the exchange of favors, and the

general reliance on others that resonates. It should be pointed out that popular culture has mythologized the mafia through exaggerations and distortions. Because we are using these popularized concepts as a kind of heuristic, we are less concerned to make a clear distinction between fact and fiction. This paper makes no claim to offer any insights into the actual workings of the mafia, but we will do our best to describe and explain the structures and importance of social networks in EQ.

EVERQUEST

In recent years the MMOG genre has grown in prominence. While early text-based games like MUDs represent some of the first attempts at this genre, it is with the advent of graphical systems like Ultima Online that we have begun to see virtual gaming worlds penetrate a mass audience. Sony/Verant's EQ is one of the most successful, having more than 430,000 paid subscribers and supporting over 118,000 players at peak periods [6]. Operating via a client/server architecture, the world of EQ is a fairly elaborately rendered 3D space in which players battle a variety of characters and creatures (also known as "mobs"). On select servers players can also engage in combat with others or adhere to more formalized role-playing.

The world of EQ is inhabited by assorted beasts and "races" who wander a vast terrain covering a number of continents. Much like old-style tabletop RPGs, players choose for themselves a "race" and class and then build a character around a particular set of skills and abilities. Ultimately the worlds of EQ are populated by elves, halflings, gnomes, trolls, humans, ogres, lizard and cat people who take on roles like warrior, cleric, necromancer, druid, wizard, and ranger.

While there is still far too little demographic information about who is playing this genre, initial studies are indicating that it is not simply the stereotyped gamer (adolescent and male) but actually a broader segment of the population playing. Women are purported to make up 20-30% of the player base for these games and the average age seems to be in the mid to upper 20s [12,26].

In this work we will discuss our research on one of the standard servers in EQ. We will be drawing on a variety of methodological approaches including in-depth online ethnography and participant observation, as well as formal interviews with players. In addition, we make use of data we have found through bulletin boards and webpages in which members of the community discuss the game and play.

A LIZARD NAMED PHRANK

Whenever a monster is killed, any member of the group that killed it can "loot" the corpse. Sometimes the looting results in a money reward, sometimes the corpse holds items that the looter can take possession of. The money from the monster is automatically divided equally between the characters in the group but items are not as easily shared. The group members have to agree on a looting scheme and then trust everyone to stick with it. These schemes range all the way from free looting to fairly complicated procedures.

On the occasion in question, we had decided to loot freely but let the built in randomizer decide who would get more valuable items – a procedure known as

"rolling". The hunt progressed nicely with the exception of an Iksar – the lizard people – named Phrank who was a bit too hot on looting and sometimes rolling several times on the same item. At the place where we were hunting, a fort with giants, the good items are mainly made up of the big weapons that some of the giants are equipped with (see Figure 1). These items can be sold to the non-player vendors for up to fifty platinum pieces, which is good money for a medium experienced player. But there is one item that clearly stands out among the others. The forest loop is an earring which increases the wisdom of the character who wears it. It is an infrequent "drop" and can be sold for around three hundred platinum pieces.



Figure 1: A giant with a sword.

Needless to say, we got very excited upon seeing the message broadcast to the group that Phrank was looting one of these precious loops. Everybody held their breath and pushed their roll buttons. A female cleric who had been unlucky so far that day came out victorious and we all cheered her good fortune when it suddenly happened. Instead of handing over the earring Phrank went linkdead. Linkdeath occurs when a player loses his network connection and therefore gets logged out of the system. In this case, however, we all immediately suspected that Phrank had typed the /quit command or simply pulled the modem cord from his computer and that he would not come back and hand over his ill-gotten loot. In a situation like this it is possible to petition a game master (GM) to come and sort out the situation. But the game masters are notoriously hard to get hold of and it may take a very long time before a petition is answered. Even if a GM replies, it may be hard to prove exactly what has happened and that the offense is grave enough to render retribution. In the long list of petitions that get sent in we all knew that ours would rank fairly low.

While Phrank had quick benefit from this loot/linkdeath scam, a not uncommon one, the question is if he knew the larger repercussions from this kind of action. Needless to say, none of the members is ever likely to invite Phrank into a group again except perhaps for the chance to punish him. Several members took the

time to inform their guildmates that this character was not to be trusted. In the absence of potent enforcement of law and order, the issue of trust – not unlike what the situation in Sicily has been historically – becomes central. Alternative methods of policing, punishment and enforcement emerge. Reputation systems come to fill in an important gap left by the myriad of violations that threaten to spoil the everyday gaming experience of the EQ players.

GROUPING: TEMPORARY ASSOCIATIONS

As we can see in this incident, being in a group can make the individual gamer vulnerable to malicious deeds from other group members. Players that choose to solo, i.e. play alone, also run the risk of suffering from the actions of others. Players can for instance attack a mob which is already claimed by someone, cause a creature to attack and kill a fellow player, or loot mobs they have not killed. Despite the risks other players bring, the game is designed in a way that makes grouping essential for achieving success, a concept that has been central in role-playing games since the days when they were played with rulebooks, pen and paper. By creating a group out of characters specializing in different but complementary skills, members can collectively take on and defeat opponents who are equal or even mightier than the individual characters in the group. It is only through working with other players that individual gamers achieve maximum results.

While this is the basic logic behind forming groups as described in the game manual there are other equally important benefits of being in a group. The most obvious one is that groups act as a micro-level, short-term social network. By joining a group, you automatically also join a dedicated chat channel for the group members. This channel is used for strategic interaction, but it is also a natural conduit for general conversation. There is normally a high level of joking and bantering going on inside the group and the concept of a “good group” is associated both with how well it has been able to perform its tasks and how pleasant and/or entertaining the interaction has been. What is at least formally meant as simply a mechanism for experience gain in practice becomes a social space in which people weave in not only gameplay but also offline elements.

Although a hunting group is a very fluid type of network, it still plays an important role in the socialization process. It is within these groups that most long-term connections are first initiated. This usually happens at the end of a session. There are many unformalized conventions about how to behave in groups. One is that it is considered good manners to let the group know in advance that you are about to leave. Another is that you exchange parting salutations before splitting up. These can be seen as a discreet evaluation of the group. If the group was nothing special, a simple “see you later” is appropriate, but if a member wants to signal that he would be interested in sharing a group again, the parting statement would be more like “great grouping with you guys, hope to see you soon.”

While it is true, as the manual states, that a group is made of up to six different characters we can begin to see more complexity by distinguishing between *characters* and *players*. It is important to understand that, at a higher level, the group actually consists of up

to six people who at the moment play those specific characters. Each EQ account is allowed eight characters per server and many players maintain several characters. Indeed, some players have access to multiple accounts (and computers) thus multiplying their number of characters on each server. Given that each player also has their own network of contacts, any given group extends well beyond the six characters in the group list. This has some significant and interesting effects on the gameplay as can be seen in the following log extract.

```
Druid “Crap”
Ranger “Ouch”
Magician “Dont move”
Druid “Oom” [out of mana] 1
Druid “Sorry [ranger]”
Ranger “Its ok”
Warrior “Hold on let me see if my BF’s
[boyfriend’s] cleric is in this zone”
Druid “We deffinitely need a heale[r]”
Warrior has left the group.
Cleric “Ask [ranger] if he’s ready for res”
[resurrection]
Magician “[ranger] you ready for rez?”
Ranger “Ya”
Wizard “wb” [welcome back]
Druid “Welcome back to the living lol” [laughs
out loud]
Cleric “Hehe too bad my warrior and his cleric is
on the same account 8(“
```

To an experienced EQ player this scene is only too familiar. The group lacked a proper healer and was temporarily overpowered by a mob and the ranger paid with his life. A character that dies loses experience points which is the principal way of measuring progress in the game. The character is also returned to its “bind spot” which, if it is far from where the player was killed, means a perilous and time consuming run back to the place where death occurred. Such a run is doubly hazardous given it will essentially be performed naked since all the character’s belongings remain with the corpse and has to be looted upon returning. Because of risky corpse runs and experience losses, the cleric is an especially sought after class. Besides being the class that is best at healing, it also has the power to resurrect players from the dead. The resurrection decreases the experience loss and eliminates the need for a run entirely. In this case, the warrior made use of her boyfriend’s cleric in order to help the ranger. By logging out her own character and logging in the cleric – which she then continued to play for a while since the group was in dire need of a healer – a potentially devastating group event turned out relatively okay.

NETWORKING THROUGH BLOOD AND BEYOND

As becomes clear in this log, while there are new temporary associations being made amongst group members, there is a second deeper layer of connection present. Within EQ there are a substantial number of people gaming together with offline links. After the unfortunate death (and helpful resurrection), the hunting continued. Later a beastlord, a class with limited healing powers, joined the group and the woman playing her boyfriend’s cleric went back to play her own warrior. The arrival of a beastlord just as another group member had to leave the group proved to be more than a lucky coincidence. The beastlord was in fact the offline wife

of the caster so he was able to ask her if she wanted to join the group when a slot opened up. The husband later decided to play another of his characters which proved to be a disastrous decision.

Beastlord "Man my husband just got killed in a bad place and cant get to his body or rezzed"
 Magician "Where is hubby [beastlord]?"
 Beastlord "Asking"
 Beastlord "Hmm hes upset"
 Warrior "Why?"
 Beastlord "Not talkng atm" [at the moment]
 Beastlord "Cause he may not be able to get his body back"
 Magician "Where did he die?"
 Beastlord "Hes not saying i know its near buring woods"
 Magician "Could a 60 ranger get it"
 Beastlord "He was 52 i think he lost his lvl"
 Warrior "If he needs help i can summon his corpse"
 Beastlord "Might"
 Magician "Got a 57 cleric too"
 Beastlord "He thinks he got 1"
 Magician "K well i can rez him with my son's cleric and probably drag with my ranger"
 Beastlord "What lvl clewric?"
 Magician "57"
 Beastlord "Okay I told him"
 Beastlord "Our puters are not in the same place so we talk thru tells too lol"

In the first log extract we saw how a character outside the group, but connected to one of the players via an offline relation, came to their assistance. Here the situation is reversed. A character played by the husband of one of the group members dies in a particularly troubling spot and runs the risk of not only losing experience but by not being able to get close enough to his corpse to loot it, permanently losing all the equipment, items and money he was carrying at the time of death.



Figure 2: Family ties

Any EQ player who has suffered this fate with a high-level character can testify to how understandable his first reaction of not even being able to communicate with his wife is. But as the log shows, the group members are quick in offering their help although they do not have any stronger bond to the character than being in the same group as his wife at the time of the incident. In the diagram (see Figure 2) we can see the connections between players and characters mentioned in the log. This diagram shows how the importance of the social network of the group to the gameplay only can be understood by putting the focus on the human players

behind the characters of a group.

The type of offline connections between players seen in the previous example are very common in EQ [7, 26]. Besides providing an explanation for how people first got exposed to the game, the offline ties between players also serve as an important component in the enjoyment of the game. Just as there is a special connection between the people that share blood bonds in the mafia [13], trust is not even an issue between offline friends or family playing EQ together. In the following example, one of the authors is having a conversation with a young guildmember that turns to the subject of family.

Dargon "I only wanted to have an alt for awhile he is a STD"
 TL "A what darg?"
 Dargon "A STD super twinked dwarf"
 TL "Heh, ah."
 Dargon "My uncle said i was that and i got laughed at by him so i stoped his moeny source for awhile"
 TL "Lo!"
 TL "How many in your family play darg?"
 Dargon "I think 7 or 8"
 TL "Wow, nice"
 TL "Did you guys get them into it or them you?"
 Dargon "Both uncles on dads side sister brother and me dad and then 2 cousins"
 Dargon "We got my 1 of my uncles but the other got it for his B day by his wife (who now regrets it)"
 TL "Aw, heh. do you guys group together a lot?"
 Dargon "And the cousins we got them into it"
 TL smiles.
 Dargon "Well the one we got in to it he is lvl 9 chanter so my 10 dwarf can and the my other uncle has about a million characters on in the guild even i group with him alot and my cousins i group with alot but the group is different i PL [power level] 2 them"
 TL "Ah, gotcha. still pretty cool. didn't realize you had all kinds of family in [the guild]. heh, neat)"
 Dargon "We have are only little chat thing set up to wear we get on and join the chat"
 TL "Oh, handy)"
 Dargon "One of my cousins are on now but differnt server"

This example further highlights the depth of player networks existing underneath the directly observable surface of characters interacting in the game. One interesting aspect of this particular example is the elevated position young Dargon has in the social network inside the game. When his uncle gives him a hard time, he retaliates by freezing in-game monetary support.

Other common connections between players are physical or cultural proximity and previous shared gaming experiences. Most Scandinavian EQ players do, for instance, know other Scandinavian players that they have met through the game. Here it is the shared language (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are at least in their written form very similar), time-zone and culture in general that works as an a priori condition for the development of the networks – similar conditions that

makes Tony Soprano belong to a network of people hailing from Sicily.

Sometimes the offline/online similarities mesh even more, as when a gaming society in a small Swedish town decided to take on EQ. It is not at all unusual to find groups of friends move from one game to another. In such situations the game simply becomes a new environment for a preexisting social network to inhabit. Thus, entire friendship circles have moved from EQ to Dark Age of Camelot and are presently considering whether or not to move on to Star Wars Galaxies when it is released.

In both the case of the gaming society and Dargon's family, the pre-existing group of people started a private chat channel inside the game to easily keep contact with each other during the gaming sessions. In each instance, the network is not primarily used to actually play together. The value can, in fact, lie in having people to talk to while off doing your own thing, helping each other out with anything from information to equipment, and knowing that there are players around to support you if you get into trouble. The game provides an additional tool for people to more permanently build each other into their network. If two players who got along especially well in a group would like to maintain more regular contact with each other they can use the `/friend` command to add each other to their respective "friends list." By issuing the `/who friends all` command they can then see which friends are logged onto the system and their location within the world.

GUILDS: FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS

While we have so far discussed both the temporary associations that take place in groups and the more permanent connections found via family/friendship networks, it is worth exploring one of the main mechanisms socialization is formalized in EQ. Guilds are officially sanctioned organizations of (a minimum of ten) players with a basic hierarchical leadership structure. Guilds provide characters membership into a private chat channel, a tag under their name stating their guild, and generally participation in bulletin boards or email lists. There is much more to belonging to a guild however than what is apparent on the technical level.

There are roughly speaking two main types of guilds. The social guilds that focus on having fun together and the uber or raiding guilds which are defined by a very well articulated commitment to pursuing the high-end game.³ While at first glance one might expect that it is predominately in the social guilds that complex social systems are found, we argue that uberguilds actually also provide quite compelling examples of the kinds of social labor we find throughout all guilds.⁴ Given it is in these high-level raiding guilds you also find high concentrations of power-gamers (PG), their use as an entry to understanding high-end social networking is a useful point of exploration.

The category of power-gamer describes a type of player who likes to push the limits of the game, often approaching it with a high degree of instrumentality and goal orientation. They tend to do a fair amount of research on zones and mobs and can put many hours into tackling particularly difficult game scenarios. Efficiency (vs. less directed play) is often seen of utmost

value and PGers are generally quite attuned to labor/experience calculations, wanting to make the most of their game time. As one puts it, "I look at EverQuest as the numbers. If you do this you'll get this, this is a better combination, you'll have a better chance to kill. That's all it is for me – to see the new stuff, and do the new stuff, and find the new stuff." Or another who said, "Leveling is all efficiency. If you sit at the right times, if you cast the right spells, you get the maximum damage." While such an approach might be imagined as quite distinct from the more obvious social styles we have seen thus far, we argue that many of the same patterns repeat.

In games like EQ there are explicit structures that often directly support a socialized version of PGing. Indeed, at the high end of the game we argue that this form of play is in large part *only* enacted and supported through cooperation with others, often within the guild system. Uber, or raiding, guilds are high level formalized social networks, based on membership, that work in concerted effort to defeat mobs and negotiate notoriously dangerous zones. While uber guilds represent one of the most instrumental game structures in EQ they function as sophisticated networks in which reputation, trust, and responsibility form the predominant modes of organization.

Reputation

As we have seen in our examination of the everyday lives of EQ players, reputation plays a significant role in a gamer's success. In uber guilds this lesson is doubly important and indeed it might be said that reputation is everything. At a very basic level ones reputation forms an important component in even being admitted into a high level guild. Potential members generally undergo a process in which they petition to join, often listing their equipment and skills. Sponsorship scenarios are common and applicants are often only considered for guild membership after being vouched for by a current member. It is not unusual to find special dispensation such as "exceptions to the level limit are family members, RL friends and alts of current and former members in good standing" [14]. The same pattern is described in [13, p. 101] where a former member of the mafia explains that he was given an easy task to complete to become a member of the "cosa nostra" because he came from a respected mafia family. Note that the layers of reputation here fold back when the sponsoring member's reputation is factored into people's judgments of a potential member. The applicant's reputation itself must be evaluated and if they are an "unknown quantity" it must indeed be established.

Applicants are regularly required to spend some time grouping with members of the guild as a process of evaluation. Guilds at this level all generally have web-based bulletin board systems and there are typically members-only recruit discussions in which people weigh in with their opinions or vote on people. Through evaluating a person's skill at playing their class, their demeanor, and even their broader values (Are they "honorable"? Do they put the needs of the group above their own?) their reputation is formed and considered. Attention is given in assessing whether they are a good fit with any codes of conduct a guild might have.

Beyond systems of reputation to get into a guild,

members also work to build and maintain their status once in. People are known for their skills as raid leaders, accomplished class players, and group organizers. There is both a pleasure in the kind of validation the esteem of the group bestows and practical benefits that accrue from reputation. At the high-end game many of the most significant accomplishments simply cannot be done alone. Getting an epic weapon (a penultimate class-specific piece of equipment), defeating a particularly tough mob, or visiting a forbidding zone are only achieved with mass cooperation. Being seen as a team-player, generous in helping with others raiding needs, or simply a powerful force whose alliance is useful, can significantly affect ones ability to mobilize resources when needed. While a character might be quite powerful in terms of experience level, they also need social capital to draw on to progress to the true high-end game.



Figure 3. Character showing guildtag.

A final thread of reputation at the top end of the game plays out with the ways guild membership signals something to the larger server community. Feelings run strong and are often contentious around the reputations of the uber guilds on a server. To some they are admiringly seen as playing the very essence of the game – taking on the toughest mobs and conquering the exclusive zones. In these instances they can even symbolically act as server proxies. For example, when the Sleeper – a particularly tough mob that would only appear once in the game – was first “woken” on a server the guild who accomplished it was cheered. Indeed, in one case a player argued that by taking on difficult new mobs high-level guilds help out the entire server:

They should be given a medal and a monument for being DIFFERENT!...Probably one of the only top flight guilds server wide going a different road and doing something original. That alone is a great accomplishment. Lots of other guilds certainly owe RoV for beta testing the loot for that entire encounter though... [25].

The idea that these guilds actually contribute to the broader collective knowledge of the game is fascinating.

Such sentiments reflect not only the kind of esteem some raiding guilds can hold amongst non-guild players, but that these organizations take on a larger role within a given server culture. Guilds themselves come to act as unique agents – entities made up of more than the sum of their members – in the broader game community. As another poster put it, “I would define ‘uber guild’ as a guild that does things that the majority of other large guilds on a server can’t do. [...] These are guilds that do things ‘first’ and generally create the strategies for BGH mobs that the rest of us use eventually” [22]. That guilds themselves might become valuable actors in the community pushes us to consider the ways not only individual players, but more formal organizations, make up a part of the social space.

Many other players however see PGs and these guilds as operating *contrary* to the spirit of the game. They are sometimes seen as too instrumental in their playing style – that they take the fun out of the game by being too focused on achievement which is often seen as acting in opposition to community. In these instances they are often framed as valuing objects or accomplishments over people. In a particularly nuanced analysis (although not so at first glance) one player suggests that the people who think uberguilds are somehow ruining the game should “wise up” and recognize that the underlying structure of the game actually fosters some of the behavior typically criticized.

Dude your ****ing deaf dumb and blind if you believe that. NONE of them are saints. PERIOD. VI [Verant Interactive] didn’t DESIGN this ****ing game for them TO be saints [18].

In both cases the guildtag comes to signal a reputation above and beyond any individual player. It acts as a social signifier and locates the character in a larger system of reputations, affiliations, favors, and even grievances.

Guilds themselves recognize this and often require members to always keep the tag that shows a player’s guild affiliation visible (see Figure 3). People often do good deeds in the name of their guild as a way of boosting its reputation. All things being equal, a prominent guildtag gives a player an edge. Generally this is a beneficial factor though it is fascinating when guilds develop reputations that are more contentious. In these cases it might be argued that the reputation ones guildtag gives could conceivably hurt game opportunities. In the case of strong guild rivalries such identifications serve as powerful boundary markers.

It is worth noting that underlying this issue of reputation is an implicit construction of social hierarchy. Within the guild system this is formally recognized, both socially and in the very system itself, through the designations of guild leader and guild officer. In each of these cases these members are afforded special privileges, often formulating the direction a guild will take and being given special weight, socially, in their opinions. At a structural level they are granted the power to actually invite new members into the guild through the use of a special command, `/guildinvite`. The more serious command, `/guildremove`, can only be issued by the member leaving or the guild leader. Quite often offenses against the guild and its codes results in this command

being used against a member. Sometimes the banishment is temporary, sometimes permanent. Given it marks a public and formal break of a member with their “family,” it is probably not surprising that its issuance is heavily controlled.

Outside of the guild system the question of how social hierarchies are managed via these reputations is much murkier. On servers there is often much debate and ambivalence about high-level guilds and so ones ranking in the social strata is extremely contextual. Indeed, the argument that some uber guild members do not recognize this fact is a long-standing bone of contention such that complaints of “strutting around” zones or acting like “they own this camp” abound. One player in a discussion forum evokes the sense that the server as a whole might count their blessings that, for a brief period, the high-level guilds were not in direct competition with each other. Sounding almost like a neighborhood member somewhere in New Jersey who breathes a sigh of relief that the local gangs are off keeping themselves busy he writes,

Considering the relative level of peace our server has enjoyed since fu started working on VT, are you sure this is such a bad thing? Before you get all pissy I’m not suggesting only fu has a right to be in VT. I’m just saying, when fu/ao/rov each have separate goals, tensions on the server reduce dramatically [2].

It is important to keep in mind the ways reputation and hierarchy are not stable categories but often the subject of debate and contestation. Ultimately, this very fact itself points to the distinctly social context of not only the categories, but how meaning is constructed around them.

Trust

With reputation comes obligation however and one of the first areas we see this in dramatically is the area of trust. Guild members are constantly risking their lives for each other and, in turn, trusting each other that raids will be well planned and that if problems arise the group will band together to solve them. Trusting ones groupmates is a common theme throughout the game and it becomes even more pronounced at the high-end where venturing into extremely dangerous zones brings that familiar risk of death and potential corpse loss. Advanced play involves immense coordination and cooperation and participants trust each other to not only play their characters well but to see through group events till everyone leaves safely.

Beyond the trust that occurs in fights, there are other instances in which players rely on the honor of others. Many guilds operate banks which serve as warehouses for the collective.⁵ Players are allowed to borrow equipment from the bank, which has been stocked by fellow members via donations. Typically players are trusted to only use the borrowed equipment on authorized “guilded” characters and to return it if they no longer need the item or leave the guild. Spells, more permanent in that they cannot be given back, are given out on an as need basis. In all these instances members are entrusted with the collective property of the guild and in turn expected to respect its status and donate back when possible. We might think of this as a form

of participation in a mafia “favore” system where those in need are helped out but later will be called upon to return the favor. The difference between doing and returning favors in general is that it is to the guild that you owe favors rather than any specific individual.

While these types of behaviors are all sanctioned, if not supported, by the game there is one form of trust that is explicitly prohibited. EQ, in its End User License Agreement, states that:

You may not transfer or share your Account with anyone, except that if you are a parent or guardian, you may permit one child to use the Account instead of you (in which case you may not use that Account) [5].

However, it is not unusual (as we saw in some of the earlier logs) to see players sharing accounts. In any given guild there are a handful of people who have particularly high-level characters that are especially beneficial (clerics being the most notable). It is common for several guild members to have access to these prime accounts.

Generally account access is rooted in friendship first and foremost but, given the way social networks operate, it is also the case that shared access simultaneously benefits a guild. For example, a guild goes on a particularly difficult raid and the entire party is wiped out. An additional cleric is needed to resurrect all of the guildmembers so one of the people present logs on another member’s character to assist. Account sharing represents one of the ultimate forms of trust in the game and is not taken lightly. A guild member who for some reason told a GM about other guild members sharing an account would be regarded similar to a squealing mafia member. On the other hand, a person at a high position in an uber guild told us that they did not have any problems with GMs knowing that they shared accounts, so it seems that some guilds have reputations which may in fact put them above the law.

Responsibility

As is probably becoming apparent, very closely underlying each of these categories is a sense of responsibility guildmembers are bound to. In many high-level guilds there is a, sometimes quite explicitly stated, rule that when the guild is participating in an important raid or if your services are needed you will as one player we interviewed put it, “drop everything [and] get your butt to the raid.” Some guilds require a certain amount of consistent weekly (or daily) raid participation and at the very least people are generally expected to, within reason, help out the guild and its members whenever possible [1]. While many guilds account for people having “offline lives,” one states its requirements quite dramatically:

You must play more EQ than you spend time sleeping. We need people who are dedicated and like to play a LOT. Our raid time is generally 4-12 PST in the evening. If you can’t make it for that, Fu isn’t the right place for you [3].

Even individual achievements can be framed in terms of guild responsibility. As one guild puts it, “Our efforts will be geared toward the TEAM not any one individual”

[17]. Keeping up with leveling, advancing toward your epic, getting dungeon keys, working on tradeskills and more generally improving ones gaming ability are seen not only as personal goals to be achieved but ones that contribute to the overall good of the guild. Some guilds even push people to play their main characters so that a critical mass of higher level players is achieved which assists the guild in taking on tougher zones and mobs. A good guild member is what Tony Soprano would recognize as a “good earner.”

FRIENDS ARE THE ULTIMATE EXPLOIT

In the context of gameplay, much of the discussion focuses on technique, strategy, and skill while our argument seeks to introduce the notion of sociality as a central success factor. The production of social networks and the circulation of social capital proves to be one of the most important aspects in EQ.

This was an explicit consideration by the game’s designers to some degree. To build in social mechanisms – from the `/friends` command to the deep reliance on grouping and the structure to support guilds – was a core design decision on the part of the development team. As Brad McQuaid, one of the designers of EQ put it,

Community is relationships between players, whether it be friendly or adversarial, symbiotic or competitive. It’s also a form of persistence, which is key to massively multiplayer games. Without community, you simply have a bunch of independent players running around the same environment. Players won’t be drawn in and there won’t be anything there to bind them. The key to creating community, therefore, is interdependence. In EverQuest, we forced interdependence in several ways and although we’ve been criticized for it, I think it’s one of a couple of reasons behind our success and current lead. [...] By creating an environment often too challenging for a solo player, people are compelled to group and even to form large guilds and alliances. All of this builds community, and it all keeps players coming back for more and more [9].

In many ways EQ represents one of the best examples of explicit socialization processes embedded in a game and serves as a notable example for other massively multiplayer games. As the genre develops it is clear that increasingly sophisticated models for interaction and relationships will need to be developed. The formalization of larger structures like guilds have been partially addressed in EQ but several areas remain underdeveloped, such as the support for characters to take on specific roles within a guild such as banker and support for collective information storage and decision making. Games like Dark Age of Camelot have for example refined group reputation mechanisms through a public ranking system.

While we have spent a good portion of this article discussing the generally beneficial role social networks play in the game, we might for a moment inquire about its downsides. Our comparison with the mafia provides some interesting areas of exploration. The ties that bind one to such powerful social structures can certainly at times also be limiting. Just as with the creation of new identities through witness protection programs, it is

not unusual to see players create additional characters (sometimes on different servers) with varying degrees of anonymity as one way of escaping persistent social ties. There has also been a fairly vibrant discussion in EQ about the ways the high-end games reliance on large groups actually inhibits individual achievements. One player commented on the persistent inability for many non-guilded (or non uber guilded) players to advance in the game:

i agree there are only a few guilds that are able to swarm in on rage [epic mob] as soon as he spawns, that being said there is no way a cleric who doesn’t belong to a large guild will ever get an epic again [2].

The image of game life as mafia life carries a double-sided nature. On the one hand extreme benefits are accrued through the social connections and knowledge this structure provides.⁶ Yet the sense that some remain either locked in or locked out of the *right* connections lingers. There is an idea in these games of class balance, that each contributing class should not outpace any others, that all classes bring complimentary attributes and that none are unduly hindered or preferred. Getting class balance “right” is something designers are constantly chasing after, often introducing various fixes into the game. It could be worthwhile to consider what social balance might mean in a game.⁷ While EQ has in many ways hit a good balance at the lower-end, the high-end game becomes a kind of hyper-socialized space. Certainly one thing the designers are having to resolve quickly and dynamically is how to run a game that has turned out to have a fairly long and robust life. How do you *socially* manage high-level and long-term players, some of whom are hitting their third year of play? While we do not want to prescribe design solutions here, we argue that it is only by taking seriously the notion of social networks in games that innovative design choices can be found.

WHO DESIGNED EVERQUEST?

From our comparison between why and how the social networks are formed in the mafia and in EQ, we have seen that there are some striking similarities. We would like to conclude this paper by asking why these similarities exist. Lappainen [13, p. 74] suggests that the mafia initially grew out of an ancient honor system where elders were entrusted to negotiate in conflicts and pass judgments that the others were obliged to adhere to. The fact that Sicily historically has been targeted by outside interests such as the Spanish and fascists has also contributed to a need for organized resistance against outside oppression. The transition into a criminal organization came later, possibly more or less because the mafia realized that they could use their powerful organization to achieve fortune for themselves. This pattern is repeated in EQ. The strong emphasis on reputation in the creation of social networks grows out of a need from the players to self-govern their gaming environment in order to secure a positive experience in the presence of potential disturbances and a simultaneous absence of an effective and reliable governing system. But ultimately these networks are also used to take shortcuts through, or trick, the formal rules of the system.

The mafia emerged out of a community because of the

specific environmental conditions it existed within. Since these conditions must be considered as given, we can conclude that the mafia was, at least in part, designed by the community itself. In the case of EQ, things get a bit more complicated. On one hand, we have seen that there is a wide gap between how the game is described through the official channels, such as in the manual, and how it is actually played. In this sense the players have taken an interesting but flawed system and over time developed the game to become what they want it to be. While they are not the designers of EQ they can be seen as the creators of their gaming experience. It is important to note that there is actually very little freedom for any given player to affect the larger social structure. This system develops slowly over time and thousands of players contribute to the creation and upholding of the norms in a way that makes all players co-constructors of the game world that they, and future players, are part of. The specific contribution of any single player is almost never visible. Understanding the nature of the collective, in both its temporary associations and more formal organizations, then becomes key.

On the other hand, the game would probably look very different if the system, rather than group members, were responsible for deciding who gets to keep a particular item or if there were a substantially higher concentration of GM's who could be more active in upholding law and order inside the game. We actually believe that the game designers did at least as much to encourage the emergence of self-governing aspects of the social networks by leaving some issues regarding trust and responsibility to the participants to sort out as they did by incorporating in-game tools for guild creation, maintenance and recognition. We are not sure how intentional this strategy was, but do believe that the game has benefited.

Given this, we are simultaneously critical of tendencies from Sony/Verant to strictly adhere to the formal laws of the game, such as the prohibition against account sharing. The claim that it is for the benefit of the players and has nothing to do with maximizing profits – when our study suggests that it is a widely adopted and condoned practice which actually adds an interesting layer to interaction between players – suggests a gap between the company's view of play and how it actually occurs. Such discrepancies are not uncommon and point in general to larger, much thornier issues for companies running virtual worlds. The tensions between grounded practice and company prescriptions about what constitutes "legitimate" gameplay needs critical appraisal. What is the proper balance between company vision and actual use and whose interests carry precedence in making design decisions? [21]

In general, any methodological approach which does not take participants as the primary actors produces flawed results. Previous research on MUDs and graphical virtual worlds has documented the rich and complex social and psychological lives participants in these spaces have [4, 8, 15, 19, 20, 24]. While games like EQ present some decidedly unique aspects, these studies teach us that even in a make-believe environment, there is nothing unreal about the people participating, their interactions with each other or the emotions the experience evokes in them. The critical study of these environments, in which gender and race continue to play

an important role, must additionally be considered [10, 11, 16]. And as we have focused on here, the emergent social structures that the participants inevitably will create need to be understood and properly cared for. In the end, EQ constitutes a primarily self-governed world in which complex social networks and systems of trust, reputation, insider/outsider distinctions, and alliances prevail. Who you know and your position within the larger social world is a central part of EQ gaming life. Just ask Tony, he knows all about it.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mana is the power that enables classes who know magic to cast spells.
- ² Power leveling is when a high-level character helps a low-level character kill mobs to speed up the latter's experience gain, and thus leveling. Although not explicitly prohibited, this conduct goes against the official idea of how the game should be played. But many players feel that it is a central aspect of the social networking and bonding between players in the game.
- ³ Uber (from the German "über" and with reference to Nietzsche's concept of "über mench") is a term that is commonly used by players in reference to these guilds. But at least in more official settings, like the guild pages, the term seems to be avoided (often substituting the term "raiding"), probably because it is only when others note uberness that it actually increases. Indeed, claiming such might be seen as unseemly and even diminish status. It is in fact common to find people tease and joke about the very category, especially amongst those players that might legitimately evoke the category. One might draw a parallel here to how the mafia never refer to themselves as the mafia. As the mafioso Gerlando Alberti once put it, "The mafia? What is that? Some kind of cheese?" [13, p. 72] We should also note that social guilds often refer to themselves as "family" guilds, indicating their emphasis on relationships, supportive atmospheres and generally "having fun."
- ⁴ Even raiding guilds themselves sometimes underplay their social qualities: "Don't confuse ROV with a social club guild, we are a 90 MPH ultra competitive TEAM guild." Of course, in most cases this is due to an equation of "social" with "chatting and hanging out" and general undirected play [17].
- ⁵ Interestingly, the game does not support any formal guild banking system so generally one or several members are entrusted with serving as the repository, actually holding all the items (often valuing quite a bit) in their accounts.
- ⁶ These benefits need not be constrained to in-game perks. As one player we interviewed said, "I'm in a much better guild than my former one and with its connections this one is getting me into a Star Wars beta [and] getting me into the Developers' Channel for games - basically a few really hard core gamers and a bunch of good game developers."
- ⁷ Discussions we are starting to see around how to envision games that the "casual gamer" would find compelling and playable (versus participants who are willing to dedicate large numbers of hours per week to the game) are one branch of this issue.