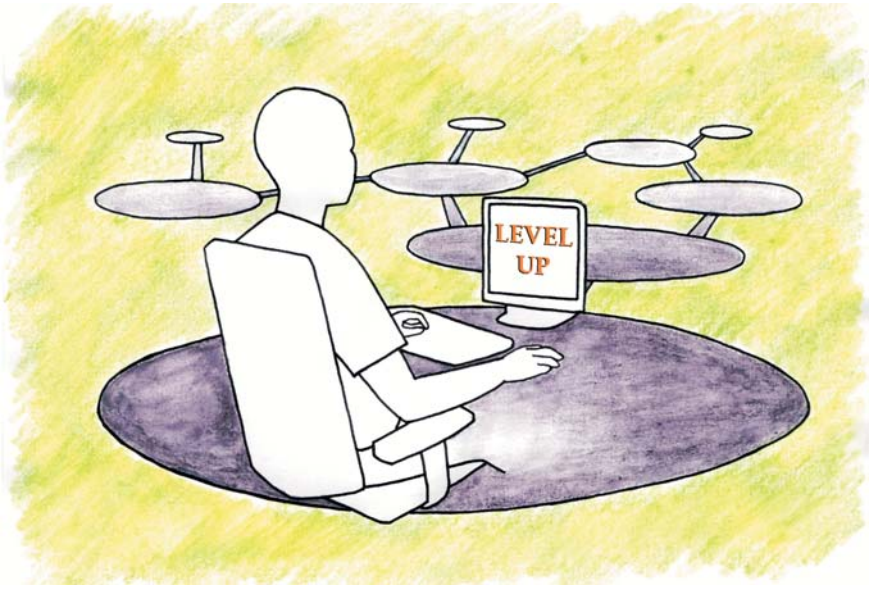
JYVÄSKYLÄ STUDIES IN HUMANITIES
74

Marko Siitonen

# Social Interaction in Online Multiplayer Communities

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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

JYVÄSKYLÄ 2007

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Editors
Maarit Valo
Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä
Irene Ylönen, Marja-Leena Tynkkynen
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# ABSTRACT

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The main purpose of this study is to describe and understand the dynamics of social interaction in online multiplayer computer gaming communities. Online multiplayer gaming has been growing in popularity alongside the general growth of computer networks. Today, millions of people all around the world are playing online multiplayer games, many of which promote cooperation and competition between gamers as an integral part of the game. A substantial amount of gamers are therefore involved in the various social networks that exist within the context.

This study was conducted qualitatively, and subscribes to the starting points of naturalistic or interpretative research. The data were collected by a year-long participant observation in two different online multiplayer communities in the game Anarchy Online, and by interviewing members (n=15) of multiplayer communities with varying backgrounds and gaming experience. The data were analyzed following an inductive approach with similarities to a grounded theory approach.

The study considers the concept of community in the context of computer-mediated communication in general and of multiplayer games in particular. The various dynamics of social interaction within multiplayer communities are analyzed. These include the motivations behind membership in multiplayer communities, the processes of establishing roles and rules within a multiplayer community, the emergence of social identity, and conflicts and the disbandment of multiplayer communities. The study paints a picture of multiplayer communities as complex and varied social networks where constant negotiation of the values, norms and rules of the community contributes to the emergence of a shared understanding of the symbolic reality of the community and a shared social identity. The methodological questions concerning the study of social interaction in multiplayer communities are discussed in detail. Towards the end of the discussion attention is drawn to several aspects of social interaction in multiplayer communities that warrant further study.

Keywords: communication technology, computer games, computer-mediated communication, social networks, virtual communities

**Author's address** Marko Siitonen
Faculty of Humanities
University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

**Supervisor** Professor Maarit Valo
Department of Communication
University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

**Reviewers** Assistant Professor Tony Manninen
Department of Information Processing Science
University of Oulu

Associate Professor T. L. Taylor
Center for Computer Games Research
IT University of Copenhagen

**Opponent** Assistant Professor Tony Manninen
Department of Information Processing Science
University of Oulu

# FOREWORD

Playing and gaming form an integral part of a rich human life. One of the most fascinating aspects of games is their ability to help people connect with one another. When an extended family sits by a table playing a board game, when a group of friends spends the entire lunch hour chatting about their favorite team's latest match, or when a group of previously unknown individuals decides to join forces against a particularly nasty foe in an online multiplayer game, there is magic in the air. Games offer opportunities for both cooperation and conflict, and the results of these opportunities are as real as life can get.

As a representative of the first generation in Finland to grow up alongside personal computers and home video gaming systems, I have often wondered about the reputation of computer gaming as an antisocial activity. To me, computer games have always represented a social medium, something that has the potential to bring people together. Having lived through the introduction of the World Wide Web and the advent of online multiplayer games for the masses, it was the apparent social potential of multiplayer gaming that encouraged me to take a more analytical look at it. It is my hope that this study will help people to appreciate the variety of social activities that take place within multiplayer games, and the effort that members of multiplayer communities put into forming and maintaining their social networks online. If there is one message that I want to communicate, it is this: social networks and the individual relationships constituting them are very real, regardless of whether they take place in a technologically mediated environment or face-to-face, whether in a serious context or a playful one. It is the contact between people that matters, and we should be glad to live at a time when our possibilities for reaching out are so diverse.

This study was made possible by financial support from various sources. I wholeheartedly thank the providers of my research grants: the University of Jyväskylä, the Finnish Cultural Foundation, and the Ellen and Artturi Nyyssönen Foundation. I thank my past employers at the University of Jyväskylä, the Innovations in Business, Communication, and Technology -project and the Department of Communication, for the ample opportunities they gave me to concentrate on research work. Trips to scientific conferences both within and outside one's home country are one of the perks of this job: such trips would not have been possible without the financial support I received. For this I extend my thanks to the Digital Games Research Association, NordForsk, Jyväskylän yliopiston tieteentekijät, and the Department of Communication at the University of Jyväskylä.

During the various stages of this work several people were involved whose contribution helped to shape the end product into the book you hold in your hand. I want to thank all the people who shared their insights into the lives of multiplayer communities with me. Thank you for the stories, for the support, and for helping me to twink my gimp character in the world of Rubi-Ka.

My colleagues at the Department of Communication and elsewhere have provided me with an intellectual home: nobody can complete a work like this in isolation, and I am the first to acknowledge the significance of a functional community. Very special thanks go to my post-graduate comrades Annaleena Ylinen, Ella Kyllönen, and Anu Sivunen: working by your side has been a true honor. The conversations we have had and the thoughts and ideas we have shared have been of tremendous importance to me throughout this journey. Associate Professor T. L. Taylor and Assistant Professor Tony Manninen kindly reviewed this study. Their feedback has been invaluable. Eleanor Underwood proof-read the text, something that you, my reader, will surely appreciate as you turn the pages. My beloved wife, Margarethe, stood by me and encouraged me ever forward, taking care of our daughter Neela's evening rituals during the last hectic months of writing. Finally, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Professor Maarit Valo, my supervisor. Five years' worth of enlightening, encouraging, and empowering conversations are what every post-graduate student should have. Thank you.

Jyväskylä, Finland, August 2007

Marko Siitonen

## FIGURES



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Interactive communities of geographically separated people

In the year 1968, almost forty years before the publication of this book, two high-ranking employees of an agency of the U.S. Department of Defense called the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) published a visionary article concerning the future of communication and the operation of social networks (1968). The authors of the article, J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor, claimed that future societies would no longer be able to make do with the intellectual capabilities of a few selected and separated individuals, but that the ever-increasing amount of information would require new, communal ways of building a shared understanding. Building on earlier thoughts by Licklider[1], they described a communication platform that would be elastic enough to be molded into whatever causes its individual users would have. This platform was to be a network of computers, transgressing the limits of place and time. In their words, this network of computers would, "[…] *move forward the development of interactive communities of geographically separated people*" (Licklider & Taylor, 1968: 30). The network Licklider and Taylor described in their 1968 article saw daylight one year later, when a scientific experiment labeled ARPANET came into being. ARPANET would eventually evolve into what we now call the Internet.

Licklider and Taylor were positively optimistic in their estimations concerning the impact of computer-mediated communication. They believed that the revolution they foresaw would take a short time to complete and that in a matter of years people would communicate "more effectively" through computer-mediated means than face-to-face. Furthermore, they predicted that the increased possibilities of selecting one's communication partners would result in a, "[…] *happier* [life] *for the on-line individual because the people with whom*

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[1] J.C.R. Licklider wrote a number of memos in 1962 introducing the concept of "Galactic Network", a series of globally interconnected computers.

*one interacts most strongly will be selected by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity.*" (Licklider & Taylor, 1968: 40.)

Later on, several scholars would adopt a similarly optimistic view of the possibilities that computer-mediated communication seemed to offer to communities (for a review, see e.g. Jones, 1997a: 9–11). The idea behind the optimism was that while computer networks could in some ways recreate the kind of communities people had been building for ages, they were not restricted to doing only that. Instead, they had the potential to help communities get better and evolve into something new and exiting.

While the "revolution" of computer-mediated communication (CMC) did not come about quite as quickly as was predicted by the most adventurous predictions of the 1950s and 1960s, the development of electronically aided communication has been undeniably fast during the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. From the initial steps of text-based CMC in the 1960's and 1970's to the multimedia-enhanced telepresence-experiences of the beginning of the 21st century, the realities of both work and free time have changed drastically for millions of people around the world. After many an irrevocable hype (e.g. the dot.com period in the late 1990s and early 2000s) it has become clear that computer-mediated communication in general and the Internet in particular are here to stay. Instead of being an elitist playground of technology pace-setters, it is a tool used routinely by very ordinary people in their everyday lives, as Haythornthwaite and Wellman note in their overview (2002). Truly, the computer networks of today do not exist in a vacuum or independently created social spaces, but rather are entwined within the larger communication infrastructure (see e.g. Jones, 1997a: 8).

Especially in industrialized nations, the operational environment in which we communicate has changed significantly since the introduction of computers used as communication device. The possibilities and channels of communication that transcend limitations of time and space have become manifold in the last few decades.

There were hints of Licklider and Taylor's interactive communities of geographically separated people already during the first attempts at computer-mediated communication. For example, one of the things the early developers of ARPANET used it for was to engage in conversations concerning science-fiction literature using a type of bulletin board (Rheingold, 2001). It soon became clear that computers indeed offered suitable ways for social networks to operate.

Still it was not until the popularization of the modern Internet that the phenomenon of online communities really took wind. With applications such as e-mail and bulletin board systems (BBS) – not to mention the World Wide Web in all its forms – the amount of people taking part in the communication within these new types of communal aggregates skyrocketed. While it is apparent that the birth of the Internet was not the sole factor behind the rise of long-distance connectivity (see e.g. Wellman, 1999), it certainly did not suppress this tendency. It was the growing use of the Internet that inspired many of the

names we use for communities operating in the context of CMC, such as *virtual* or *cyber communities*.

**Reaching out… to play**

The communication possibilities that computer networks opened were not limited to passing pieces of text from one person to another. Since the very beginning, computers and computer networks were used to facilitate various forms of interactive games[2]. One of the earliest examples of such a game was *Empire*, a strategy game that was running on the PLATO mainframe in the early 1970s (sources vary in their interpretation of the actual dates, see e.g. Demaria & Wilson, 2002: 304–305; Koster, 2002). There were many other early computer games, too, practically all of which required multiple human players for them to operate and some of which utilized the early computer networks instead of being located on a single computer.

During the next decades, computer games developed in leaps and bounds. Some games continued on the path laid out by early multiplayer games and utilized the possibilities of computer networks. While not graphically extravagant, games such as Multi-User Dungeons (MUD) would let dozens or hundreds of people connect, play, and communicate with one another. It is no wonder, then, that some of that communication was social in nature, and resulted in the birth of computer game-related social networks, groups, and communities.

## 1.2 Goals and structure of the study

This study discusses online multiplayer computer gaming communities, or *multiplayer communities* for short, from a communication perspective. For the purposes of this study, multiplayer communities are broadly seen as social networks where the ties between members are kept up at least partly by means of computer-mediated communication, and where the motivation behind forming and maintaining the network has largely to do with the act of playing multiplayer games. During the course of the study, a more comprehensive definition will be offered.

There are many possible avenues of approach to understanding communication within the community context. For example, one could look at how a community presents itself to a larger audience, or how a community might strive to control relationships between members and outsiders. This study concentrates on the kind of communication that occurs within multiplayer communities, i.e. between a community's members. Such

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2 These games have been referred to as digital games, video games, and computer games, among others. Throughout this study, the term *computer games* is used for consistency.

communication can tend to be task-oriented or it can be more socially oriented, but as long as it takes place within the framework of the social network that constitutes a community, there is an inherent social dimension to it. From now on, in order to make the text more lively, the terms communication and social interaction[3] are used as synonyms for this kind of communication.

By choosing to concentrate on communication as a starting point to understanding community one agrees to the supposition that communities are born, function, and continue their existence through communication. In short, they are seen as being *socially constructed*. This means that it is possible to examine and understand community by looking at the ordinary activities, especially communication, of its members (see e.g. Baym, 2000: 22).

Furthermore, this study sees communities as being inherently symbolic. This means that the interaction between community members constitutes a shared system of meanings. This system has to be built together through an ongoing and ever-changing process of negotiation. From this viewpoint, communities are not born out of thin air but rather require time and continuous social interaction between their members to exist. To see communities as symbolic constructions means that instead of looking at the structure of a community, for example, a symbolic viewpoint appreciates the values, norms, and moral codes of a community. It is through sharing these qualities that a community provides its members with a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging. (On the symbolic construction of community, see Cohen, 1989.)

The main goal of this study is to *describe and understand the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities*. The general intent of the research goal is not to test a particular theory or to build a formal theory per se. Rather, the aim is to provide a holistic, multi-faceted, and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. At the same time this study subscribes to the viewpoint that there is no single truth concerning social interaction in multiplayer communities, but that there are multiple social realities constructed according to individuals' experiences and interpretations. This viewpoint situates the present study in what can be broadly called an interpretative or naturalistic paradigm (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000: 18–20). As such, this study relies heavily on experiences of members of multiplayer communities as well as the experiences and interpretations of the researcher.

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[3] There are views according to which all communication within social aggregates is inherently social, thus negating the need for the prefix "social" in conjunction with words like *communication* or *interaction*. However, it is sometimes confusing to speak of interaction by itself when dealing with matters of computer-mediated communication. This is because the term interaction is widely used in fields outside that of communication research, where it can refer to all kinds of interactions such as Human Computer Interaction (HCI), or even interaction between digital devices.

Several smaller goals can be found within the main goal of this study. These goals are:

- To discuss the concept of community in the context of computer-mediated communication in general and multiplayer games in particular.
- To discuss the role of sociability in the context of multiplayer games.
- To discuss a stereotypical multiplayer community life cycle by looking closely at
    - the motivations behind membership in multiplayer communities,
    - the experiences and interpretations that members of multiplayer communities have concerning the communicative processes that constitute community,
    - the patterns in the communication behavior of members of multiplayer communities, and
    - the structural and operational factors that distinguish different types of multiplayer communities.

Furthermore, there runs a methodological vein throughout this study. Within this vein, questions such as what kind of challenges the multiplayer context poses to the chosen research methods, and how best to approach social interaction in this specific context are discussed.

This research project is conducted in the spirit of naturalistic inquiry (see e.g. Frey et al., 2000: 257–286). Naturalistic inquiry means looking at the actual behavior of people situated in natural settings. Naturalistic inquiry is usually conducted with as few presuppositions as possible. The aim is to understand the phenomenon under scrutiny on its own terms, instead of letting earlier expectations dictate the course the study takes.

This research project can also be seen as following a general ethnographic approach. It has a strong emphasis on a holistic exploration of the nature of multiplayer communities instead of setting to test hypotheses. It also operates with an open set of data that has not been coded at the point of data collection into a closed set of analytic categories. Furthermore, it investigates a small number of cases, and the analysis of data involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions. (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994: 248.) On the other hand, this study does not aim to be an ethnography per se - while the analysis relies heavily on one lengthy period of participant observation in one particular multiplayer game, it reaches beyond that with the help of the interview data. In effect, this study should not be approached as a case study of a specific game.

The starting points presented above mean that there is heavy reliance on experiences of members of multiplayer communities, as well as the experiences of the researcher. This is reflected in the methods of data-collection used, which consist of interviews and participant observation. The approach chosen for this

study can be described as interpretative. The research approach and the methods used are described in more detail in sections 3.2 and 3.3.

**The structure of this book**

There is no one chapter that holds all the results, but rather there is a constant dialogue between data and theory throughout chapters four to eight. On the other hand, the vast majority of the detailed discussion of the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities is situated in chapter six, which, in a way, can be seen as the core of this study. It is my hope that this presentation will succeed in drawing the reader deep into the lifeworld of multiplayer games and the communities within.

This book starts by introducing the reader to the context of multiplayer online computer games and the social interaction that takes place within them. Chapter two takes a look at the field of contemporary multiplayer online computer games.

Chapter three presents the reader with an account of various approaches used when studying social interaction in the context of online communities, as well as a detailed description of the methods used in this research.

In chapter four, we take a closer look at the possibilities and limitations of communication in multiplayer computer games. Special consideration is given to sociability as a motivator for multiplayer gaming.

Chapter five covers issues related to community and the task of defining what we really mean when we say we are looking at *multiplayer communities*. The chapter opens with a discussion of more traditional concepts of community and moves through contemporary research on virtual communities towards establishing a definition of multiplayer communities.

Chapter six takes us on an ethnographic voyage to the core of two multiplayer communities. Combining participant observation with interviews, the chapter deals broadly with the scope of phenomena related to the operation of multiplayer communities. These include roles, rules, rituals, and conflicts as well as an account of the life cycle of the said communities.

Chapter seven includes an evaluation of the study, and chapter eight returns to a broader view and discusses those factors of communication in multiplayer communities that extend beyond the scope of individual members. The chapter offers a definition of multiplayer communities, and concludes with a discussion concerning the future of social networks in online settings along with suggestions for future research.

# 2 SOCIAL GAMING IN COMPUTER NETWORKS

This chapter introduces the reader to the world of multiplayer online computer games. Section 2.1 sees a discussion of the history of multiplayer computer games. In section 2.2, those characteristics of multiplayer games that are relevant from a communications point of view are analyzed. In section 2.3, questions regarding the players of multiplayer games are discussed. These include such questions as who plays multiplayer games and what the typical requirements of being a player are.

## 2.1 The history of multiplayer computer games

When talking about games, one needs to somehow differentiate between play and game. This study adopts Callois' (1961) distinction, where playing represents a larger range of activities characterized by freedom, voluntariness, and a general sense of providing joy and pleasure to its participants. Furthermore, play usually takes place within specific boundaries, for example time and place. Gaming, on the other hand, is much like play only with the addition of a specific rule set. In a game, much of the excitement and pleasure of playing comes from navigating within the boundaries of this rule set, learning and overcoming its limits. From now on, the terms playing and gaming are used interchangeably for variability's sake, meaning the latter.

The social reality of modern humans has always had elements of play and gaming in it. Several of the most popular games of our time, such as chess, card games, and sports have roots that go back hundreds or even thousands of years (see e.g. Huizinga, 1950).

The sociability surrounding games stems from the fact that many games are played between multiple participants, often between groups or teams. In addition, there is typically a rich discourse surrounding the most popular of games, such as football, bridge, or golf. Even though there are several examples of games that can be played solo, gaming as a general concept has a strong

communal aspect. Gaming, in the words of Johan Huizinga (1950: 13), "[…] *promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.*"

This stress on communality means that gaming offers an interesting context from a communication perspective. Often players are required to make sense of the game by communicating with one another, be it about assessing the current situation or coordinating the next move. In addition to more task-oriented communication, there is often a need for socially oriented interaction between gamers as well. Such communication might aim at motivating other team members to better performance, or consoling fellow gamers after a lost game.

Online multiplayer computer games follow this tradition of sociability in many ways. Due to the multiplayer aspect they require multiple players to participate in the game in order for it to function as designed. They also offer possibilities for participation and communication that have previously been unavailable. For example, the sheer scope of possible participants in a typical multiplayer game far exceeds anything possible within any one physical space, with possibly thousands or tens of thousands of people participating simultaneously in the same game. Furthermore, multiplayer games make good use of the connecting capabilities of computer networks in that they allow for people from different continents to reach out and meet in the same virtual space.

The best-known examples of computer games from the 1950s and 1960s, such as *SpaceWar!* and *Pong*, were essentially multiplayer games. This was largely due to the limited computing capabilities of early computers - after all, the capacity of experimental super computers of the time was barely adequate to create the graphical representations needed to play the games. Thus there was a need for humans to act as players, with computers taking care of the actual functioning of the game. While games such as *Pong* were essentially two player games, there were examples of grander designs as well, such as *Empire*, a strategy game operating on the PLATO-system that according to some sources could include as many as 32 players (Demaria & Wilson, 2002: 304–305). In addition to being multiplayer games, many early examples of computer games, such as *SpaceWar!*, fitted the description of online gaming as well (e.g. Kirriemuir, 2006: 23). Interestingly enough, the early debut of online multiplayer games did not mean that they would become the dominant type of computer gaming for the next few decades.

Coming into the seventies and eighties, computing capacity grew large enough to enable computer-guided opponents to take a more active role in the gameplay. This development resulted in a plethora of standalone games that can be referred to as single player computer games. Between the late seventies and mid nineties there was a steady growth of games that could be played on a home computer or console. This growth was marked by a predominance of single-player games. There were several multiplayer titles as well, but usually they required the players to occupy the same room, and did not take advantage

of communication networks. For the masses buying their games from a local gaming store, online games were at best a distant dream.

At the same time, there was a steady niche of online computer games for those few that had access to computer networks. These games benefited from the development of modem technology, despite its limited bandwidth. Games such as *LORD* (Legend of the Red Dragon) operated within Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and had a simple, textual interface. The most notable of these online multiplayer games were text-based virtual worlds that are typically known as MUDs (Multiple User Dungeon / Dimension / Domain)[4].

A MUD is, in the words of Pavel Curtis, "[…] *a network-accessible, multiparticipant, user-extensible virtual reality whose user interface is entirely textual*" (Curtis, 1997: 121). In a typical MUD players control characters, commonly called *avatars*, and try to proceed in the game by interacting with the game world as well as with other players. Typically, there is a strong incentive to making one's character stronger, which in turn opens up new possibilities within the game world. As a genre MUDs originated in the late 1970s and grew a steady player base during the next decades. Most MUDs were (and still are) free, often organized around enthusiastic gamers and operating on donations or support from academic institutions.

Throughout the 1990s developers of computer games followed closely the advances made in computer network technology. Games such as *Doom* in 1993 utilized computer networks both as a channel of distribution and as a part of enhancing the gaming experience by allowing a small number of players to play against each other, effectively including a single player game and a multiplayer game in the same package. Raised connection speeds, along with the increased computing capabilities of computers, made it possible to have ever larger groups of geographically dispersed players participate in the same game. Towards the end of the 1990s an increasing amount of commercial multiplayer titles saw daylight, and the era of online games truly began.

In addition to the MUDs introduced above, there are some key genres of online multiplayer games that warrant attention. The first genre is that of First Person Shooter (FPS) games such as *Quake* (1995). From a multiplayer perspective, these games typically offer a relatively fast-paced gaming experience for small teams or groups of players competing against each other. Many of these games, such as *Counter Strike* and its descendants, include a vibrant tournament-scene that ties together the individual games into a wider gaming experience.

Another important genre is that of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG, also MMOG or MMO). This genre had its lift-off towards the end of the 1990s, when *Meridian 59* (1996) and *Ultima Online* (1997) started a new wave of commercial online multiplayer games that could host a massive number of players and typically included a monthly billing system.

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[4] There are several variants to MUDs such as MOOs (MUDs, object oriented), MUSHes (Multiple user shared hallucination), and MUCKs (Multiple user character kingdom), all of which follow the form of synchronous, text-based programs (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 252).

These games are central both to the study of multiplayer communities in general and to this study in particular. This is partly because of the prevalence of MMOG-centered studies within the field of research on multiplayer communities, and partly because a large part of the data used in this study comes from a participant observation within such a game.

MMOGs represent the largest online games known at the time. Put simply, they can be thought of as modernized versions of MUDs. They are essentially virtual environments where players control avatars within a graphically represented game world. By exploring the game world and completing missions within it, players strive to advance their avatars' abilities and skills. Developing their character, in turn, opens up more options to explore within the game world. The reason for the word "massively" in the abbreviation is the notion that there are usually thousands of players taking part in the game. As with MUDs, MMOGs typically include a social element, either encouraging players to interact with one another or absolutely forcing them to do so. Indeed, it is usually the case that the higher levels of these types of games cannot be mastered when playing alone.

MMOGs are typically commercial, as the costs of building and maintaining such complex virtual worlds is high. Most MMOGs charge their players a fee. This can be in the form of purchasing the game from a vendor, paying monthly fees, or a billing system integrated into the game's mechanics that makes virtual items cost real-world money. There are other possibilities as well, for example funding the game by selling advertisement space to outside businesses.

MMOGs usually have an open structure where notions of winning or losing the game do not hold. Because of the unending nature of these games, it has been said that they do not meet the classic definitions of games. For this reason, players of MMOGs are often referred to as "users" instead of "gamers" or "players" (see e.g. Filiciak, 2006: 89). For the purposes of this study, the game-like elements in these multiplayer games are seen as strong enough to warrant the use of the terms player and gamer.

There are also many other prominent types of multiplayer games. These include strategy games (both real-time and turn-based) such as *Starcraft* (1998), and games that combine several approaches, such as *Diablo* (1997), which represented a sort of mixture of MUDs and graphical multiplayer role-playing games.

The popularity of multiplayer games has been growing steadily over the years. Also their scope, variation, and supply have become increasingly multiform. It is therefore beyond the scope of this study to present an exhaustive overview of the complete history of multiplayer games. For this there are many good sources, for example Koster's (2002) compilation of the basic timeline of online worlds.

## 2.2 Features of online multiplayer computer games

There is great variation within contemporary online multiplayer computer games. Some games expand single-player games by adding to them an online multiplayer aspect, while some games are designed to be played by multiple players from the start. Some games are designed for a handful of players to engage in, while some require at the very least hundreds to function properly. Some allow players to drop in for a quick game while others are built so that it is difficult to achieve a meaningful gaming experience without spending lengthy periods of time playing the game.

As a concept, though, there are certain factors that connect different online multiplayer computer games with one another. First, a *multiplayer game* requires two or more players who are not computer controlled. Most multiplayer games follow a pattern of two teams, multiple single players, or multiple teams (Aarseth, Smedstad & Sunnanå, 2003: 51–52).

Second, being an *online game* means that in order to function as designed, the game requires a connection to computer networks. Generally this means that the game utilizes the Internet, but this is not mandatory. Players might build a network specifically for their gaming purposes, as in the case of LAN parties[5], or when company workers use the local intranet to play a game after work hours.

Not all online multiplayer games require or encourage the kind of social interaction that leads to lasting relationships, groups, and communities. For example, it is possible to join in the net for a quick game of *Backgammon* or *Poker* without actually engaging in much conversation with one's gaming partners. There is communication and interaction there for sure, such as when a player makes a move that affects the way the other player or players can participate in the game. Still, the mere presence of multiple people and a joint activity is not necessarily an indicator of a social aspect that goes beyond fleeting acquaintance. This is not to say that sociability does not or cannot play an important part in such games. Players can expand their gaming experience outside the actual game, and in doing so engage in activities that are of interest to the topic of this study, namely online multiplayer computer gaming communities.

In those online multiplayer computer games where the aspect of social interaction is more self-evident, the game's mechanics usually require people to cooperate with one another in order to be able to fully experience the game. In a typical contemporary MMOG, for example, teams of dozens of people might be forced to cooperate to accomplish a certain feat in the game, and extensive planning and training of such gaming activities are not rare. To cooperate on such a level, relatively complex communication is usually required. Furthermore, there are distinct advantages in forming stable relationships, as

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5 Local area networks (LANs) are gatherings where players bring their own computers and form a network between them.

they typically enable players to reach higher levels of cooperation than when playing with strangers.

With communication between players so common, it is no surprise that some of it is especially social in nature. Even though not all players appreciate the social aspects of multiplayer games to the same extent, sociability seems to be a major motivational factor for many players (see e.g. Yee, 2001; 2006; Griffiths, Davies & Chappel, 2003). Indeed, in some cases social interaction might become more important than playing or experiencing the virtual world itself. This seems to hold true especially for more experienced players (Schiano & White, 1998: 358).

Thus far we have established the basic ingredients of online multiplayer computer games. We have also noted that some games seem to encourage their players to interact with one another on a deeper level than others. For the purposes of this study, one last narrowing-down needs to be done. The games that this study focuses on take place in *virtual environments* (see e.g. Aarseth, 2003: 2). This focus means that for example computerized toys and traditional card games played online are excluded from this study.

## 2.3 Who moves the pawn? The players of multiplayer computer games

Online multiplayer computer gaming as a phenomenon has been on the upsurge in recent years (Entertainment Software Association, 2006; Woodcock, 2006). This tendency has coincided with the astonishing growth of the Internet and communication networks in general. For more than fifteen years we have witnessed growing numbers of Internet users worldwide. Furthermore, when people have gotten used to using communication networks, they have also allocated more and more time to using them. For example, according to the 2005 USC study on Internet usage trends in the U.S., approximately 78 per cent of Americans went online in that year. In addition, the number of hours spent online rose to an unparalleled 13.3 hours a week (USC, 2005).

Not surprisingly, the popularity of online multiplayer games reflects the overall popularity of the contemporary telecommunications networks. The largest known online multiplayer games, with up to millions of players, operate mostly in industrial countries.

Playing online multiplayer games is not a mainstream activity. According to the 2005 USC study, online gaming was not in the list of American users' top ten Internet activities (USC, 2005). According to a large survey conducted in Germany in 2003, less than four percent of the German population played some kinds of online games (ACTA 2003 according to Kolo & Baur, 2004). In addition, one has to remember that statistical surveys such as the two presented above typically include all kinds of games under the term online games, rather than concentrating on such multiplayer games as are the focus of this study. For

example, trivia and puzzle games, and browser-based mini games are all examples of online games that do not necessarily have such a strong multiplayer aspect as would encourage or demand long-term social networks. Still, even though not as widespread as some other applications of communication networks such as e-mail, multiplayer games do reach a substantial number of people. It is also likely that the player base of multiplayer online games has not yet reached its peak (see e.g. Entertainment Software Association, 2006). The exact number of multiplayer game players is difficult to estimate, mostly because of the reluctance of commercial gaming companies to divulge information concerning their player base. Still, the overall trends in player base growth have been documented with reasonable accuracy (see e.g. Woodcock, 2006).

A classic example of the potential growth of multiplayer games' player base comes from a MMOG called *World of Warcraft*. Even before its publication in 2004, World of Warcraft gathered hundreds of thousands of testers. After its launch, the game reached millions of players in mere months, and has been expanding its player base ever since.

While World of Warcraft is an anomaly because of its size, there are other examples of MMOGs that have reached millions of players. Normally, massive online multiplayer games gather a player base of some tens or hundreds of thousands of players. There is also a plethora of multiplayer games that never reach such amounts of players, yet continue to function and develop for years.

This study touches a wide range of online multiplayer computer games, from those with only a couple of hundred players to those with millions. Of these, the genre of MMOGs is somewhat more prominently presented due to the fact that the participant observation data were gathered from one such game. This game, *Anarchy Online*, represents a typical MMOG of the early 2000s, with tens of thousands of active players and a total player base of between one and two hundred thousand players. An introduction to this game can be found in sub-section 6.1.2.

**The age and gender of players of multiplayer games**

There are two persistent myths that surface from time to time concerning who plays computer games. According to these myths, female players are a rarity, and computer gaming is an activity directed mainly at children. While there is a grain of truth to these myths, in reality the players of multiplayer games are more diverse than previously thought (see e.g. Taylor, 2006).

Computer gaming has traditionally been viewed as a masculine activity, perhaps due to its technical origin and the abundance of violent and competitive themes in the games. However, recent studies from various countries show that females form a significant number of all players, and that most adolescent girls of today play digital games on a regular basis (for a review, see Bryce, Rutter & Sullivan, 2006).

The estimates of gender division in online gaming vary, but it is not unheard of for female players to account for as much as 40 to 50 percent of the

general player population. The gender division of online players is generally more even than when looking at all genres of computer gaming combined, where male players still dominate. (Entertainment Software Association, 2006.)

General demographics aside, the amount of male or female players in any given game is dependent on the game in question. Some multiplayer game genres, such as FPS games, have a reputation for having fewer females involved than other types of games such as MUDs and MMOGs. To see online multiplayer games as a strictly masculine activity is, however, misleading.

The popular media often concentrate on issues of children's gaming, such as when discussing age limits or video game violence. This discourse, while certainly important in its own right, usually overlooks the fact that the average age of those playing digital games is relatively high. For example in the U.S. it is somewhere around 33 (Entertainment Software Association, 2006).

Similar estimates of the average age of players have been presented in the online multiplayer context. For example, players of MMOGs are typically somewhere between 20 and 30 years of age (see e.g. Yee 2001; Kolo & Baur 2004). Naturally there are teenagers involved in these games, but in a similar vein there are also players who are significantly older than the average age. In short, most MMOG players are either in working life or at some point in their studies.

**The international reality of multiplayer computer games**

Games and gaming exist in every known culture. While the actual forms of gaming can vary, the underlying principles represent a fairly universal language. In addition, there are many games that are known across several cultures, offering a relatively level playing field for intercultural interaction. This tendency is also evident in the context of online multiplayer games, where many games witness a colorful mix of nationalities and cultures playing together. There seems, though, to be a dialectical tension between convergence and divergence that concerns internationality in multiplayer games.

First, online multiplayer gaming occurs both within and beyond nationally defined boundaries. Many of the more popular games are developed and published by international companies, and it is common that there are players from various national backgrounds. Some online multiplayer games have complicated league- and tournament-structures built around them, much in the same way as professional sports do. Instead of running on a track, one can nowadays represent one's country by playing a computer game in an international competition[6].

On the other hand, there are multiple factors that keep nationalities and language groups separate when playing online multiplayer games. Some of these factors are language or culture bound, such as when a game has been localized - translated into a certain language. Even when this is not the case, it is

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6 An example of such competitions is the annual Electronic Sports World Cup (http://www.eswc.com).

common for people who share a common language to stick together. For example, a Finnish player starting any large, mainstream MMOGs can be relatively sure that there are groups and communities that are either totally Finnish or have a strong Finnish base of members (we shall see an example of this in the discussion concerning multiplayer communities in chapter six).

Sometimes there are technological factors separating players from different nationalities. Connecting to a server on the other side of the world might slow down and spoil the game experience. It is also possible that the game requires a certain payment method that is not equally available in all countries.

Furthermore, geographical factors, such as time zones, might sometimes dictate who one's most likely gaming partners are. For example, if one is working full-time and the only time to play is in the evening after work, the other players one encounters might well differ from those one would meet if one played during the daytime. (For more information concerning language, culture, and time zones in multiplayer games, see e.g. Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003.)

Multiplayer games, then, include elements of both cultural divergence and convergence. Even though it is of course possible that one tendency will overcome the other in some special contexts, it is likely that these elements will continue to exist side by side.

**The requirements of play**

The number of people taking part in the online computer gaming experience has been growing in recent years. Still, playing online multiplayer computer games is far from being a hobby just everyone can pick up. To be an active online gamer requires computer skills, as well as access to a suitably equipped computer. In addition, many contemporary games require extensive play-related knowledge and skills from their players. These requirements make the learning curve of such games relatively steep, especially for those with little or no experience in computer gaming in general.

Online gaming is often expensive. Even though some online multiplayer games are free, even free games require a computer or console and a network connection, all of which cost money. With many of the most popular online games being commercial, the actual cost of playing might be significant, too. A typical MMO-game costs between 20 and 50 euros to purchase, after which there is a monthly fee of 10 to 15 euros for as long as one wants to play the game. It is possible to play relatively cheaply, though, by utilizing net cafeterias and games without monthly fees, or games that have an alternative commercial practice such as gaining funds through advertizing.

In addition to the material and competence limitations on who can fully participate in online multiplayer gaming, there is the question of dedication to be considered. While the amount of time spent playing multiplayer games varies greatly, many studies show players spending 20 to 30 hours a week in their chosen virtual world. Indeed, especially within the genre of MMOGs there exists a significant body of players who spend more time playing multiplayer

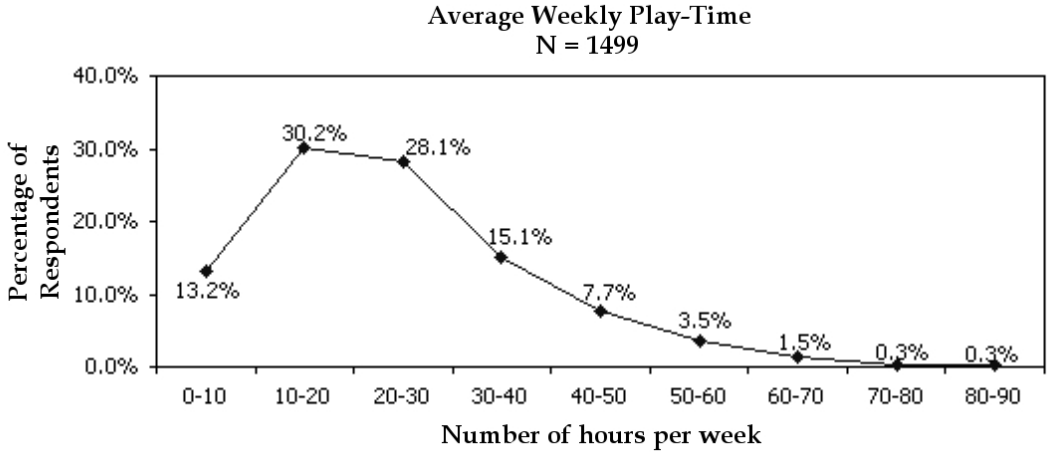


FIGURE 1 Average weekly playing time of Everquest players (Yee, 2001)

games than they spend in paid employment or studying. (Castronova, 2001: 25; Yee, 2001; Kolo & Baur, 2004.)

An example of a typical curve of the average weekly playing time of MMOG players is presented by Yee (2001) as depicted in Figure 1. While these particular data are somewhat dated, the basic trends of a high variation between the most active and the more passive players, and the significant amount of time an average player spends per week playing the game are still approximately correct (see e.g. Yee, 2006c).

The amount of time reported in studies such as Yee's (2001) is in sharp contrast with the disquisition of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) that looked at all players of digital games. According to the ESA, gamers spend in total less than seven hours a week playing digital games. The discrepancy can be explained by the broad focus of the ESA study, since it covered all kinds of games from puzzles to solitaire, while studies like Yee's focus on the kinds of multiplayer games that are known to be time-consuming.

Active participation in multiplayer games requires many resources, of which time is one of the most important. These requirements put players of multiplayer games into unequal starting positions, but all in all, there is an ever-increasing body of players who are willing to invest significant amounts of time and other resources in their chosen multiplayer games.

# 3 FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This chapter discusses the methodological aspects of the study. Section 3.1 presents an introductory look at the tradition of studying social interaction in multiplayer games. Section 3.2 begins with a discussion of the framework of the study. Attention is then turned to an analysis of participant observation as a method of data-collection when studying social interaction in multiplayer games. In the course of this discussion several ethical and practical issues concerning the use of the chosen methods of data-collection are analyzed. Section 3.3 concludes the methodological discussion by explaining the actual data-collection procedure and analysis of the data, ending with a word on issues of presentation.

## 3.1 Studying social interaction in multiplayer communities

The history of academic research on social interaction in the context of multiplayer communities is not nearly as long as the history of the communities or multiplayer games themselves. While games such as MUDs have been around since the late seventies, it took until the early nineties before academic research into this new phenomenon started to gather momentum.

Among the first to analyze the emergent social phenomena situated around multiplayer games were Richard Bartle (1996) and Lynn Cherny (1999). Bartle approached the question of sociability in multiplayer games from the perspective of a game developer. In his widely cited article, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs" (1996), he presented a typology of players of online multiplayer games. While later criticized, Bartle's analysis of the dynamics evident in the player base of a typical MUD provided a stepping stone for understanding the different motivations behind players' behavior. Another example of an early voice in the field is Lynn Cherny, who published several articles and conference papers in the mid-1990s. Her major contribution was her dissertation, later on a book, in which she presented one of the first

large-scale socio-linguistic studies of an online chat community operating within an environment comparable to many online games.

Both Bartle's and Cherny's examples illustrate well the plurality of approaches that would also later characterize research on the social aspects of multiplayer online gaming. This topic has been of interest to many an academic discipline, including but by no means limited to communication, sociology, education, psychology, and cultural studies.

Game studies have been seen as divided into three basic approaches, according to their main interest (Järvinen, 2003). First, research can concentrate strictly on games themselves, analyzing the rules, mechanics, and inner dynamics of games. Second, research can focus on the interaction between a game and a gamer, looking at the various factors that game experience is based upon. Third, the rich cultural aspect surrounding games can be the main object of interest.

A single study can well encompass two or more of these approaches. For example, research concerning social interaction within multiplayer games can be situated somewhere near the cultural approach with a hint of game dynamics interest. Overall it can be said that it is the social reality, and not the mechanics of a game, that is the crux of research concerning social interaction in multiplayer games. Still, also in these studies games are considered to be more than just a backdrop. Typically, such studies look at the dynamics of games themselves in addition to the dynamics of social interaction. In many cases, it is only through an understanding of the games that certain communication practices become understandable, as the rules and mechanics of games might have an influence on various aspects of the social interaction that takes place in their general context.

A variety of methodological approaches are used in studying social interaction in multiplayer games. As is typical of computer-mediated contexts, the enormous amount of data that can be provided and stored in computer networks lends itself well to quantitative approaches. This kind of data helps answer questions such as how popular various multiplayer games are and what kind of statistics on usage profile a typical gamer, for example. Qualitative approaches such as ethnography have found the various contexts of computer-mediated communication equally fruitful, and in them there has been a plethora of studies aiming at understanding human social behavior. (Costigan, 1999.)

The various approaches to studying social interaction in multiplayer games should be seen as complimentary rather than competing. Indeed, CMC as a general context and multiplayer games as a specific one seem to offer many possibilities for using multiple approaches simultaneously. On the one hand, methods aimed at interpretation and so-called "deep" understanding are especially useful when looking at a previously unknown or constantly shifting phenomenon, such as multiplayer games and the social aggregates within. On the other hand, the possibilities of collecting and analyzing representative samples and drawing generalizable conclusions are equally useful in the quest to map the face of social organization online. (Paccagnella, 1997.)

## 3.2 A quest for deep understanding – the methodology of the study

This section includes discussion of the framework of the study. Sub-section 3.2.1 starts with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological viewpoints behind the study, and then proceeds to methodological questions. Sub-sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3 then proceed to further elaborate the two main methods of data-collection, namely those of participant observation and open-ended in-depth interviews.

### 3.2.1 Choosing an interpretative approach

This study represents a blurred genre of qualitative research, where I have chosen contributions from approaches such as symbolic interactionism, naturalistic inquiry, and ethnography. Some key assumptions behind the methodological choices are discussed over the next paragraphs.

In this study, communities are seen as socially constructed systems of shared meanings. This viewpoint follows the concept of symbolic interactionism that sees shared meanings as a basis for communication. Symbolic interactionism stems from Mead's (1934) and Blumer's (1969) thoughts on societies as dynamic communication networks. In short, communication between people requires a set of shared meanings. These meanings are continuously negotiated in a process of symbolic interaction. Negotiating meanings is an ongoing process, and it is through this process that a society's norms, values, and attitudes are developed (For a review, see e.g. Wood, 1997: 126-132; Littlejohn, 1999: 155-161).

Furthermore, a community system has to be built together through an ongoing and ever-changing process of negotiation. Communities, then, are not born out of thin air but rather require time and continuous social interaction between their members in order to exist. To see communities as symbolic constructions means that instead of looking at the structure of a community at a given point in time, for example, a symbolic interactionist viewpoint appreciates the values, norms, and moral codes of a community. It is through negotiating these qualities that a community provides its members with a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging (on the symbolic construction of community, see Cohen, 1989).

The main goal of this study is to *describe and understand the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities*. The aim is to provide a holistic, multi-faceted, and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon while appreciating that there is no single truth "out there", but rather that our social reality is constructed according to individuals' experiences and interpretations. This viewpoint situates the present study in what can be broadly called an interpretative or naturalistic paradigm (Frey et. al., 2000: 18–20). As such, this

study relies heavily on experiences of members of multiplayer communities as well as the experiences of the researcher.

This study can also be seen as leaning towards an ethnographic approach. This study places strong emphasis on an open-minded exploration of the nature of multiplayer communities instead of setting out to test hypotheses. It also operates with an open set of data that has not been coded at the point of data collection into a closed set of analytic categories. Furthermore, it investigates a small number of cases, and the analysis of data involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions. (See e.g. Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994: 248.)

On the other hand, while the study certainly can be described as ethnographic, I chose not to call it explicitly an ethnography (on the difference between a study being ethnographic and an actual ethnography, see e.g. Wolcott, 1995). This decision was based on the wide focus of the study. Instead of concentrating on generating a deep cultural interpretation of one specific multiplayer community, I chose to remain at a more general level in order to present a broad analysis of social interaction within such communities. The same reasoning goes for not labeling the study a case study.

The commitment to a naturalistic and interpretative approach was further strengthened by the notion that when this research project started, communication in multiplayer communities represented a rather understudied phenomenon. A naturalistic paradigm can be seen as being especially suitable for approaching new or constantly changing phenomena, as studies following it are typically adaptive and avoid forcing the studied phenomenon into previously dictated templates (Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). In order to reach the goal of the study a pluralistic and open-ended research plan was formulated, much in the spirit of Geertz's (1973; 1983) "thick description" or "interpretations of interpretations" (see e.g. Denzin & Lincoln 1994). To have an open-ended research plan means that the study follows an emergent design, where the research plan can be changed during the process instead of being set in stone from the start (see e.g. Frey et. al., 2000: 264).

True to the tradition of naturalistic studies, the goal of this study is to understand the actual habitat or "lifeworld" of those participating in the study. To this end I wanted data that would include both the experiences and conceptions of members of multiplayer communities, as well as the actual behavior, i.e. activities and communication, of people situated within such social aggregates. The aim of this interpretation was to provide an understanding of the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities.

Furthermore, I wanted to approach multiplayer communities from a holistic viewpoint. Such a viewpoint emphasizes that the characteristics of community systems cannot be understood in separation from one another. Rather, individual characteristics become understandable only when connected to the larger setting in which they are situated. A holistic viewpoint does not rule out focusing on individual practices, though, as it is possible to see the

community system as a whole while simultaneously looking at the detail and dynamics within (Baym, 2000: 216-217). On the other hand, I respect the opinion that a holistic description of any phenomenon such as multiplayer communities is practically impossible, and that every description is necessarily partial (Hine, 2000; 65).

The idea of a symbolic construction of community was further strengthened by the Symbolic Convergence Theory of Ernst Bormann (e.g. 1986). Briefly, symbolic convergence is a process through which individuals build a feeling of community and a group consciousness (Griffin, 1997: 34). To achieve convergence requires time, which underlines the difficulty of understanding the symbolic reality of a community as an outsider. For example, every new member of a community must go through a learning process in order to be able to fully participate in the life of the community. Aspects like other members' roles, attitudes, and viewpoints as well as the norms and rules of interaction can only be learned through introduction to the symbolic reality of the community. Similarly, a researcher interested in the shared meanings within a social system effectively needs to go through a similar process as a new member. It is in the nature of the community process that this experience cannot be achieved instantaneously, but rather that it requires a long time to build up (Miller & Slater, 2000: 21–23). From this viewpoint the use of methods that typically involve a lengthy data-collection process, such as participant observation, becomes recommendable (see e.g. Wood, 1997: 132).

With the abovementioned viewpoints in mind, two main methods of data collection were chosen for this study. First, participant observation was utilized to gather data in the form of in-game log files, field notes made by the researcher, images captured during game play, and textual and audio-visual material gathered from both official and unofficial web-sites related to the game where the participant observation took place. By participating in the everyday life of a community, the purpose was to get first-hand experience of the living conditions within it. This kind of experience has been referred to as *ethnographic immersion*, and can be seen as a key to understanding the community process (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 87–91).

Second, open-ended in-depth interviews with members of various multiplayer communities were conducted before, during, and after the participant observation. The main purpose of this data was to gain an insight into the life worlds of various kinds of multiplayer communities through the experiences and interpretations of the interviewees. Furthermore, this data was used to complement and reflect the participant observation data, especially in those cases where I interviewed members of the same multiplayer community that I belonged to during the participant observation.

The purpose of having a number of data sources was to provide a multi-faceted understanding of the phenomenon of social interaction in multiplayer communities. This kind of approach is commonly referred to as data triangulation (for triangulation, see e.g. Frey et al., 2000: 85). Interpretative, qualitative research approaches typically appreciate the interconnectedness of methods of data-collection and the actual data collected. For example, with

regards to participant observation, the data collected through it include not only the actual social interaction involved, but also the experiences and feelings of the researcher, and the thoughts that led to the choices made during the research process (see e.g. Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995: 11–12; Frey et al., 2000: 258–259).

Because of this approach, it is especially important that the researcher not only describes, but also questions, the methods of data collection used. Indeed, this reflexivity is a key aspect in evaluating the so-called reliability and validity of a qualitative study. Because of this I chose to devote a large portion of this study to discussing methodological issues, especially those related to the *use of participant observation when studying multiplayer communities*. This discussion can be seen as a secondary research goal. Some of the discussion is located here in chapter three while some can be found later on in Chapters six and seven.

In the next two sub-sections I present a discussion of the use of participant observation when studying multiplayer communities. Sub-section 3.2.2 includes a discussion of various issues such as the possibilities and limitations of data-collection. Sub-section 3.2.3 analyses the ethical issues involved.

### 3.2.2 Becoming a player - participant observation in multiplayer games

Participant observation has its roots in the dawn of social sciences, and especially in the field of anthropology. As a method, it is also closely connected to an ethnographic approach, even though the two are not synonymous. True to a natural inquiry approach, a researcher utilizing participant observation tries to get as close as possible to the social interaction of the members of a community. The goal is to piece together how the people in the community live and function in certain situations, and what they think is important and meaningful for them. The purpose of this immersion is to give the researcher experience of the living conditions and other factors that affect the social reality being studied. (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 87–91.) In terms of length, participant observation is usually long-term, taking months or even years (Miller & Slater, 2000: 21–23).

Participant observation offers a fairly open-ended and flexible way of getting an insight into social phenomena in the Internet. The range of data that can be collected during participant observation is wide. The actual data can consist of field notes, pictures, and recordings, among other things. Participant observation is often combined with other means of data collection such as interviews (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 87–91). Because of these traits, participant observation seems to be particularly well suited to studying computer-mediated communication (Kendall, 1999: 57).

In addition to its multiplicity, participant observation offers good possibilities for reflexion during the research process. It is sometimes possible for the researcher to be in contact with the participants of the study long after the official period of data-collection. This continuous connection can be used to both test new ideas concerning the study, and to confirm the reliability of the analysis. (Ward, 1999: 5–8.)

One example of the stages that participant observation might follow when studying online communities is presented by Nocera (2002). In Nocera´s model there are four stages. The first stage consists of the researcher's attempts to get to know the phenomenon that he or she will be studying. This stage includes learning the "language" of the community and the basics of using the necessary communication technologies. During this first stage, the researcher contacts at least some members of the community and explains to them his or her role as a researcher. In effect, Nocera is of the opinion that the researcher should always tell the participants about the research. This first part of the research could be described as more passive and orienting than the later phases. During the second and third stages, the researcher becomes a member of the community. In addition the researcher can conduct selected interviews with some members of the community. Data gathered during participation can be used to deepen the themes of these interviews. The purpose of these stages is for the researcher to immerse him or herself in the social dynamics of the community. The fourth stage consists of categorizing and analyzing the data gathered during the participation. (Nocera, 2002: 5–6.) The process that this study followed was similar to that presented above.

When studying social interaction in a multiplayer community through participant observation, the first step is to learn to play the game. Then, questions related to the actual data collection arise. Unlike most social interaction in the Internet, the social reality of contemporary online computer games does not necessarily comprise only textual communication. This means that it is not as simple to gather data as, for example, when looking at chat-based communities or newsgroups. In this respect, multiplayer computer games resemble the physical reality: it is almost impossible for the researcher to grasp the whole phenomenon; instead he or she will be mostly restricted to the observations and notes that can be made while playing. On the other hand, the involvement of computers means that there are many ways of recording and collecting data that would be difficult or impossible in a traditional face-to-face setting.

As a method of data collection, participant observation is not without its limitations, though. It is relatively time-consuming, requires both extensive material and temporal resources from the researcher, and leads to difficult questions regarding the ethical responsibilities of the researcher. Still, it can be claimed that the benefits of participant observation outweigh its disadvantages and that only by participating actively in the lives of the people who constitute the multiplayer communities is it possible to understand the social interaction through which they build and maintain their communities.

When observing everyday interactions there are several differing observational roles that a researcher may assume. These roles range from complete participant through participant as observer and observer as participant to complete observer. The main differences between these roles are illustrated by two factors: how much the researcher participates in the activities under observation, and whether people are aware of being observed. (Gold,

1958; see also Frey et al., 2000: 267–269.) In this research project, my role as a researcher was that of a participant as observer. This means that I revealed my research agenda to the participants of the study, but tried nevertheless to become as involved as possible in the social surrounding and situations that are being studied.

Over the next pages, several key issues connected to the use of participant observation as a method of data collection in the context of multiplayer games and communities are discussed. These include the length and timing of data-collection, the possibility for automated saving of data, the possibilities and challenges of multimedia in the form of capturing images and video, issues regarding writing field notes, and lastly the requirement of computer gaming expertise imposed on the researcher who wishes to enter the world of multiplayer communities. Embedded within each topic are the choices made in the present study.

**The length and timing of data-collection**

There are no rigid rules as to how long a period of data collection should be when utilizing a method such as participant observation. Sometimes researchers gain sufficient amounts of data after a few observational periods, or indeed even in only one single period (see e.g. Frey et al., 2000: 269). Still, there are several factors that support using long-term research.

In reality, it is not always easy to reach into a multiplayer community and look at the social interaction there. Many of the contemporary online computer games are built so that some parts of the game are hidden from a casual visitor or a new player. Therefore, if a researcher is to truly look into the social interaction within a game, it is unrealistic to believe that dropping quickly into the game would provide sufficient data for a deep analysis of the communication in that game's community or communities. The researcher might, for example, encounter only other casual players and new and/or inexperienced players, thus missing the social interaction that takes place between players who have been playing for a longer time (Kendall, 1999: 70–71).

Furthermore, multiplayer communities like all communities are continuous processes. For example, upon entering the world of a relatively new community one should let it develop and mature before attempting to define its central motivations or special characteristics (Harrison & Stephen, 1999: 234). Even in the case of established communities the dynamics of social interaction within them are not necessarily easy to distinguish, or might not be always present. Without a long enough period of data-collection, then, it might be difficult to estimate the trustworthiness of the findings (Kendall, 1999: 70–71).

The community under scrutiny might also have existed before the researcher entered it, and it might continue existing long after he or she has left it. This means that the period of time that the researcher spends in the community is not necessarily representative of its so-called normal everyday existence. For example, some of the community members might be absent without the researcher knowing it, or an outside influence might be having an

effect on the inner workings of the community in an anomalous manner. Failure to recognize such factors might result in skewed conceptions of the community life. (Bell & Newby, 1971: 54-58.)

Participant observation as a method is generally relatively resistant to many of the risks presented above. It is typically conducted over a relatively long period of time, ranging from months to years. In addition, participant observation is often combined with other methods of data-collection such as interviews. These other methods can be used to gain a wider view of the subject of the study, for example by making it possible to ask the members of the community whether the period of time that the data-collection took place represented a typical period in the life time of the community, or if it was somehow different from their average everyday existence. (See e.g. Nocera 2002; Kendall 1999.)

In the present study, participant observation was used over a period of one year. This period included introduction to the game Anarchy Online, joining a multiplayer community within that game, living through its disbandment, seeing the birth of a new multiplayer community, and being a member of that community until the eve of its disbandment, which was later on confirmed in an interview with one of the community members. During this year there were both active and passive periods of data-collection, influenced for example by everyday occurrences such as vacation and celebration. While the participant observation could have been continued even after the one-year period, it was deemed at that point that the data collected was rich enough for the purposes of the study.

**Automated saving of data**

Participant observation in computer networks benefits from the same ease of data-collection as many other approaches. Above all, it is often easy to accumulate ample data sets without much work. Almost every act leaves some kind of a trace on the network, and these traces can often be saved fairly easily for later use. For example, the possibility of automatically saving log files empowers the researcher to gather a large amount of messages quickly into a static and easily accessible form. Log files can come in many forms, but the kinds used in participant observation are typically text logs of synchronous communication events. They might or might not include technical information as well, such as a list of executed commands or who was present in addition to those actively participating.

There are some well-known issues that can cause problems when analyzing log files. Log files simplify the actual communication in at least two crucial ways. First, the stable form of the log files cannot fully represent the temporal dimension of the social interaction, such as the dynamics of turn taking or the effects of lag on the flow of the conversation. Second, log files cannot convey what the participants of the social interaction actually experience when they are communicating in a computer-mediated environment (Marvin, 1995).

This oversimplifying nature of the log files is even more evident when looking at the social interaction in online computer games. Many of the games function not only on a textual, but also on an audio-visual level, which is categorically ignored in the creation of textual log files. While in some contexts of CMC, log files might yield sufficient information on the social processes within, trusting them alone in a multiplayer game context is inadvisable. There are actually many similarities between multimedia-rich online environments and face-to-face communication, as pure textual representation can never truly catch all the aspects of what is happening. In computer-mediated contexts, however, it is easy to forget this and take text log files at face value.

The next excerpt highlights the significance of situational information for automatically generated log files in the context of multimedia online environments. Furthermore, it presents an example of the kind of log files that I collected during my participant observation in Anarchy Online. The excerpt shows three characters that form a team talking to each other while playing the game. The two underlined lines will be discussed after the excerpt:[7]

16:10: Groo: aggro here
16:11: Fiendpower: insig here
16:11: Lilah: poor doc got loving
16:11: Groo: heh, I like loving
16:11: Groo: atrox can take some
16:12: Lilah: ah buffs dropping...
*16:12: Fiendpower: yeah if it get to bad i'll mongo them to me*
*16:13: Lilah: omg Groo you scared me*
16:13: Groo: hee
16:13: Groo: nothing like a little scare in the morning!
16:13: Lilah: i'm an old lady don't do that to me
16:13: Groo: oih, sorry

Without situational information, it is impossible to know for example what happened between lines 16:12 and 16:13 in the conversation. The automatically generated log file alone cannot answer the questions posed by the researcher, but rather situational information has to be included in some other way. For example, one can go through the log files after playing the game, and insert additional information when necessary. Next is the excerpt with added information:

> [The game takes place in a science-fiction themed MMOG. A group of players have chosen to team up in order to be able to fight better against the opponents that the game provides them. At the moment of recording this log file, the team is hunting monsters on a swamp. One player in the team is playing a "doctor", a character that can heal other characters. This character, Groo, is at first under attack, but the situation calms down.]

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7 The names of the characters have been changed.

16:10: Groo: aggro[8] here
16:11: Fiendpower: insig[9] here
16:11: Lilah: poor doc got loving
16:11: Groo: heh, I like loving
16:11: Groo: atrox[10] can take some
16:12: Lilah: ah buffs dropping...
16:12: Fiendpower: yeah if it get to bad i'll mongo[11] them to me

[The fight is over, and the team sits down. The water of the swamp is half covering the characters. Groo lies down, and is totally covered by water. Suddenly Groo emerges from the water.]

16:13: Lilah: omg[12] Groo you scared me
16:13: Groo: hee
16:13: Groo: nothing like a little scare in the morning!
16:13: Lilah: i'm an old lady don't do that to me
16:13: Groo: oih, sorry

Naturally, adding this level of detail to every log file is usually impossible because of the sheer amount of typical log file data. Rather, the example illustrates the importance of first-hand experience when interpreting computer-generated log files, as even small reminders of the events can bring back the flow of events to a researcher who was there him or herself.

Despite their shortcomings, automated log files can be an invaluable aid in collecting large amounts of textual data concerning social interaction in online computer games. Using additional situational information, and combining log files with other forms of data, such as screen shots, can be used to increase their explanatory value.

One should be aware that the promise of automated saving of data should not mean that the researcher needs to, or indeed should, "record everything". This is not only practically impossible, but also can be highly detrimental to the completion of the study (see e.g. Wolcott, 1995).

During the participant observation of this study, log files were gathered of practically all gaming events with the exception of a few that were lost for technical reasons such as errors in the software. Typically, after a gaming session I checked that the log file was successfully saved. During this time I also wrote notes straight into the log file, briefly describing the major events during that gaming event. These descriptions helped me later on to reconstruct the actual events in those instances where the information in the log files themselves was insufficient.

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8 aggro = when a monster turns aggressive towards a character
9 insig = insignia, a collectable item in the game
10 atrox = one of the character races in the game, usually a muscular, enduring humanoid
11 mongo = (in this case) to use special skills or spells to force a monster to attack a certain character
12 omg = oh my god!, a typical abbreviation

**Capturing Images and Video**

Typically, online computer games use graphical representations to create the world in which the game takes place. Even MUDs, although created with the help of textual symbols, sometimes use colors and combinations of symbols to comprise diverse symbols. Ultimately, this means that the games make it possible for players to express themselves by graphical means, in addition to textual communication.

One advantage of doing participant observation in a computer-mediated context is that it is possible to record both images and video, including sound, without the risk of disturbing the ongoing social interaction. This is a significant benefit compared to conducting participant observation in a face-to-face situation, where such actions could be obtrusive. In effect, it is technologically possible to record everything that takes place during the game without the participants' awareness.

There are two ways of capturing graphical expressions during participant observation. One is to take screenshots which effectively freeze the situation into a snapshot. The other is to use video capture, which is the equivalent of taping the situation with a camcorder. Taking screenshots is the simpler option of the two, and one that is often implemented already in the user interface of the game. In addition, taking screenshots does not usually take up much of the computer's resources, ensuring a smooth and uninterrupted game play.

Even though taking screenshots is simpler, it has its downsides. Many online computer games are synchronous in nature. This means that capturing an image or saving a log file brings about the same problems as recording techniques in face-to-face settings. What if the character was trying to impress another player with an elaborate dance, or what if the players communicated through a series of jumps or gleeful shouts transmitted through a microphone? These kind of "creative player actions" (Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2003) are often just as hard to capture as fleeting expressions or gestures during a face-to-face conversation.

Some online computer games support by default the possibility of recording a video of the game events, giving the players the chance to share and review successful games. Still, it is more common that one needs a special program to do video capture. The need for an external program might lead to problems. Many of the new online computer games require considerable resources from the computer and the network to operate properly, and the addition of a separate recording program might hinder game play significantly. The programs might also suffer from compatibility problems with the computer hardware, further complicating matters. The video sequences might also be relatively long, making the handling and analyzing of the data a problem.

Furthermore, participation in the game might require the full concentration of the researcher, making it difficult for him or her to take screenshots or video capture. In some games such as First Person Shooters the game is generally so fast-paced that even a small lapse in concentration can

have fatal results for the game play. Even in slower paced games there might be periods of hectic action.

Sometimes it is possible to obtain videos or replays of actual game events without taping them oneself. In the context of some online computer games, like Counter Strike, sharing recorded playing events and modifying them in an artistic way is an integral part of the activities of the community. Naturally, there are many questions regarding the copyright and ethical use of such videos, but as a potential source of data for computer-mediated social interaction it is still largely untapped.

During my participant observation in Anarchy Online I did not record gaming incidents on video. This was because of limitations in the computing power of the computer on which I played the game and the fact that the game program itself did not offer a possibility to record video feed. I did take a number of screenshots during the course of data-collection. These screenshots typically included data that were not recorded in the log files, such as when another player approached me with a private message or when I wanted to capture a moment when a large number of the community members' game characters were in close vicinity within the game world.

**Field Notes**

Taking notes about the activities and interaction within the community is usually an integral part of gathering data while doing participant observation. Field notes form the starting point for the final textual form of the research and the ideas it contains. Also, they help the researcher to outline and analyze the phenomena already during data collection. (Emerson et. al., 1995.)

The purpose of field notes is not to dutifully record everything that happens. Indeed, that is usually not even possible. Rather, field notes can concentrate on some critical moments or revelations, or include some key information that helps the researcher to later make a reconstruction of the observed activities. Often, this information is presented in a narrative form.

Making field notes while participating in an online computer game differs from face-to-face contexts in one crucial way: other members of the community have no way of knowing when the researcher is actually making the notes, or even if he or she is doing it at all (Paccagnella, 1997). Mostly, this can be seen as liberating, which helps the researcher to make notes without disturbing the ongoing social interaction. In many face-to-face situations it would be inappropriate for the researcher to start visibly recording what is happening. In other situations, it can even be altogether forbidden. Of course there are solutions to this dilemma, such as withdrawing from the scene to write the notes somewhere else, or waiting until the situation is over before starting to make notes about it. On the other hand, it can be claimed that the actual act of writing notes contributes to how the relationship between the researcher and the other members of the community develops (Emerson et al., 1995: 25). From this viewpoint, visible note-taking is not a hindrance, but instead an important

part of the whole ethnographic research process that is missed when the note-taking is hidden.

This freedom to make notes while participating in the game cannot always be taken for granted. Many of the games that include social interaction require the players to be active at least some of the time, and sometimes this level of activity is so high that it is almost impossible to do anything else while playing. In these cases, the note-taking is very similar to face-to-face contexts, where most of the actual writing happens after the situation is already over.

In this study I wrote two kinds of field notes. First, after each gaming session I returned to the log files created and inserted information that I thought was meaningful and descriptive of that particular gaming event. Second, I kept a separate file where I recorded thoughts on the research process throughout the data-collection period.

**Required expertise of the participant observer**

When conducting a study within a specific context, such as multiplayer computer games, some knowledge of that context is usually necessary or at least beneficial for the success of the study. Many researchers within the field of game studies stress the importance of researchers playing the games they study (Mortensen, 2002; Aarseth, 2003; Kolo & Baur, 2004). Indeed, it is paradoxical to try to understand a phenomenon without trying to know as much about it as possible. A game researcher who has never played the games he or she is studying could be compared to a researcher of literature who has never actually read a book.

When conducting participant observation, the goal of the researcher is to immerse him or herself in the context of the study. As such, it is necessary for the researcher to have some sort of expertise on the subject of the study, or to build it during the research process. As Frey et al. (2000: 268) note in their summary of participant observation as a method, it is "[…] *sometimes impossible to become a participant observer without extensive, rigorous training.*" In the context of studying multiplayer communities, this means that some expertise in online multiplayer games is usually required.

With the above-mentioned points of view in mind, it is relevant to ask how much a researcher should know about the nature and specifics of such games as a context when studying social interaction within them. The question is, should a researcher who wants to examine phenomena related to computer games also be a gamer him or herself? For example, the focus of this study is quite specific: the communication among the gamers, not the rules of the game or the human-computer interaction. On the other hand, the game or games that are being played are always more than just shared areas of interest for the members of the community. The game provides the community with motivation, content, rules, and limitations concerning communication, among other things. These issues in assessing the significance of a particular game's mechanics for the study of the social interaction within it are complex and,

therefore, any decision on how to proceed should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Naturally, a balance has to be found with regards to the level of context-related expertise required from the researcher. Quite simply, it must be possible to comment on and analyze the phenomena surrounding gaming without investing months or even years in mastering a certain game. Sometimes standing totally isolated from the subject of the study might provide an interesting angle. This is not the case when utilizing participant observation as a method of data-collection, however.

Even though it is impossible to state clear rules for this, it is usually the case that when using participant observation as a method of data collection, knowing how to play the games related to the study is crucial. First, the researcher should know how to play the games because often it is impossible to participate in the life of the community without being able to "play along." Second, in order to understand what the members of the community are talking about, the researcher should have some knowledge of the symbols and meanings relevant to the game and the community. Last, but not least, the researcher should be aware of the many game-connected rules, rituals and roles that govern communication within the community, as well as the motivations behind play (e.g. Mortensen, 2002).

Learning the vocabulary, or jargon, of the game and the community within it is fairly straightforward. Usually communication follows conventions commonly shared in the Internet, like the use of certain abbreviations[13] and smileys. Also, the manual of the game should provide some explanations of the vocabulary used in the game. Still, there are some things that can only be learned through playing the game and by being in contact with other players. These usually include game- or community specific jargon (like names of places, players or events), and nonverbal communication (as when using voice or graphical representations to communicate).

For an experienced gamer, learning the basics of any given online computer game is not difficult. What might be difficult is to master the game well enough to be able to participate fully in the activities of a multiplayer community. Depending on the game and the community, the level required from the members of the community might be high, and even if the community is not leaning toward competitive play, the continuous shortcomings of a new member are not something that is appreciated.

Even after learning to play the game and understand the communication surrounding it, the learning process is far from being over. Most of the online multiplayer computer games are under constant development, with newer versions and updates being published with each passing day.

In this study, integral to the whole decision to utilize participant observation was the idea that it would be possible because of my long-term gaming experience. Despite not having actually played the game where the participant observation took place, I had experience of several other online

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13 E.g. lol (laughing out loud), afk (away from keyboard), and brb (be right back).

multiplayer games. The process of how I learned to play Anarchy Online and how I became a member of a multiplayer community is described in detail in section 6.1.2.

### 3.2.3 To tell or not to tell - ethics of participant observation

In this section I analyze some of the ethical questions concerning studying social interaction in multiplayer communities. Special attention is given to issues related to participant observation, as it is the main method of data collection used in this study. I do not claim that the topics covered in this section apply only to studying computer-mediated social interaction, but rather that they are highlighted in computer-mediated contexts.

Ethical considerations are an integral part of all research involving human participants. All research should aim to do good while causing no harm to those involved in it. Unfortunately, solving the ethical problems concerning studying social interaction in communication networks is not always easy. Even though the existing human subject research models are mostly valid, research into computer-mediated communication has led to new challenges and questions regarding ethical research procedures. This has brought into question the suitability of earlier human subject research models (e.g. Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002). Typical questions related to ethics deal with anonymity, the continuous flux of people and communication systems, and the perceived privacy or publicity of virtual spaces.

Social interaction in communication networks can be collected and examined in ways that have not been possible before. Screen captures, video recording, log-files, and lurking (following social interaction without actually taking part in it) offer temptingly easy ways to collect large amounts of data without the participants' knowledge. Still, as Reid (1996: 170) asserts, "[…] *it does not follow that easy access to material implies that it lies within the public domain.*" Overall, the ease of data collection or the difficulties involved in obtaining written permission from the participants should not be taken to mean that the ethical requirements for the study are less important than in research where the human subjects are more tangibly present.

Despite the difficulties involved, there are some guidelines and recommendations that have been designed to help in making ethical choices when studying human behavior in the Internet (e.g. Association of Computing Machinery, 2004; Bruckman, 2002; Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). These guides are usually designed to be indicative of the desired action rather than binding in nature.

It is difficult, if not altogether impossible to present an ethical guide that would suit all research into social interaction on the Internet. This is partly due to the vast scope of the Internet. There is no single technological solution that could be used all the time; rather, people tend to use a variety of technologies to achieve their social goals. This means that also the research is divided between multiple technologies and their use. Furthermore, the Internet research to date

has been divided into many fields of research, which has made it even more difficult to achieve a consensus regarding the central ethical questions.

There are basically two extreme ethical positions, between which most of the research concerning social interaction tends to fall. These extremes are the utilitarian and the deontological viewpoints. According to utilitarian thinking, the possible benefits that follow from a study can justify methods that would otherwise be inadvisable or downright forbidden. From a deontological standpoint, the possible benefits generated by research can never remove the ethical responsibility of the researcher to the participants in the research. This means that according to deontological thinking, if a study cannot be done without utilizing unethical research methods, then it should not be done at all. Most of the research concerning human subjects and their behavior on the Internet seems to end up somewhere between these two extremes. (See e.g. Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002)

Even though every case has to be reviewed individually, one is strongly advised against using deceptive research methods when studying multiplayer communities. True, it has been argued that requesting permission and other attempts to inform the participants might risk disrupting the normal flow of the social interaction, be it a game or a discussion board (e.g. King, 1996: 120–122; Mann & Stewart, 2000: 52–53; Reid, 1996: 170). There is some evidence of this happening in a way that could be disruptive for research (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). Still, fear of such events should not be a sufficient ground for using non-reactive methods. Even in the rather utilitarian guide of conduct of the APA (American Psychological Association), it is noted that: "[…] *unless they have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study's significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective non-deceptive alternative procedures are not feasible*" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2002: 11).

One way of determining the amount of disclosure needed is to rate the community by its *group accessibility* and *perceived privacy* (King, 1996). Group accessibility refers to the extent to which the group can be accessed by strangers; perceived privacy refers to the actual social interaction and the expectation of privacy among the group members (King, 1996: 125–126).

In the world of multiplayer communities, there are practically no totally open communities. Even the communities with very loose standards of recruitment operate some sort of elimination, not letting all those wishing to be admitted to actually enter the community. In many cases, both gaming skills and personal compatibility are required by a new recruit before the doors of a community open. This means that the second dimension, perceived privacy, is relatively high in multiplayer communities. Even though some of the social interaction of the community might occur in the more public channels, communities usually have at least one totally private means of communicating with each other. This can be a feature in the game, an IRC-channel, a newsgroup or even an e-mail list, but it is nevertheless conceived as private. With both high group accessibility and perceived privacy, research concerning

multiplayer communities should try to be as open as possible, and refrain from using non-reactive methods.

**Informing the participants and informed consent**

Despite one's best intentions, it is almost impossible to fully disclose one's intentions and background while employing participant observation in multiplayer communities (e.g. Reid, 1996: 170). In face-to-face contexts, the mere presence of the researcher is usually enough to remind the participants of his or her role. In communication networks, however, this kind of level of disclosure might be harder to achieve. It might be that the membership of the community is in a continuous flux. In computer-mediated contexts it is possible for people to come and go freely, which might leave only a small group of active members who will remember the role of the researcher without constant reminding. In addition, differences in time zones might lead to a situation where it is not easy to reach all the members of the community equally. In these cases, it might be sometimes acceptable to inform only the most active members of the community, those who are usually also in the leading position within it (Danet, 2001). Another way to look at this problem is to not to inform all possible participants, but to seek permission from specific individuals, primarily when using long quotes in the research report (Boehlefeld, 1996: 149–150).

When choosing the medium through which to make known the study and the role of the researcher, one must bear in mind that it seems that doing so while playing the game requires great prudence. This is because many online multiplayer computer games require near constant concentration from the players; even if it does not, interrupting the gaming experience for any length of time is frequently frowned upon. In some cases it is possible to add information about the research in the description or name of the character being played, but sometimes even this might lead to irritation and negative responses. In the end, one has to judge the receptiveness of any given community to such disturbances during the situation itself.

In addition to overall ethical claims, one powerful argument speaks for disclosure when conducting participant observation in a multiplayer community. Sometimes, after being informed about the dual role of the researcher, the members of the community might seek to help him or her in the research task (e.g. Reid, 1996: 171). For example, multiplayer communities often hold various events and meetings within the virtual realm, which provide interesting material for those seeking to understand the social interaction within these communities. However, it is almost impossible for someone to know about all of these events without actively playing the game for twenty-four hours a day. If the other members of the community were to know about the research, then they might advise the researcher about these events or recount what transpired should he or she be unable to attend.

Even though informing participants about some research in a technologically mediated environment is not simple, getting their informed consent is even more complicated. First, getting the participants to submit an

actual written consent with a signature can prove to be extremely difficult. More advisable is to accept the expressions of informed consent in electronic form, despite their relative unreliability (Danet, 2001). Second, while many people might be otherwise willing to participate in the study, they might not want to give their personal information to the researcher. Since people do not usually use their real names when playing online computer games, an expression of consent might include only the name of the avatar used in the game, or it might come from an anonymous address that gives no additional information on the participant (Taylor, 1999). With these limitations, the whole concept of informed consent within computer-mediated interactions, and especially within multiplayer communities, has to be reviewed again.

**Protecting online identities**

The degree of anonymity in computer-mediated contexts, including multiplayer games, can be thought of as a continuum. One end of this continuum includes full anonymity, and the other end full recognizability in relation to the physical person residing outside computer networks. Typically, the pseudonyms used in computer-mediated communication can be situated somewhere between these two extremes. Even though a pseudonym might not be fully traceable to a physical person, the pseudonym itself can carry a history and reputation, making it recognizable. (Donath 1999, 53.) Furthermore, this degree of anonymity might be difficult for an outsider to estimate. For example, members of a multiplayer community might have extensive knowledge of each others' history that a researcher stepping in from the outside is hard pressed to understand. For all practical purposes, the only truly ethical choice with regards to online communities is that possible pseudonyms will be given similar treatment to so-called real names; that is, they should be changed upon presentation of the data.

In addition to the identities of individual members, it is possible that the whole online community might require protection. There are cases in the history of online community research where a researcher has not been able to rightly estimate the possible effects of disclosing information that could be used to identify a community. Merely reporting the name of an online community may lead to an overpopulation of the community and thus a strain on its established social reality when a mob of enthusiastic readers strive to experience the phenomena described in the study (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 57–59; Reid, 1996).

**Conclusion**

Even though there has been a considerable amount of research concerning social interaction in the Internet since the 1990s, some very basic ethical questions still remain without a satisfactory solution. In the spirit of a deontological viewpoint, I claim that people, whether they appear to the researcher as words on the screen or flesh and blood beings on the street-corner,

should always have the right to know when they are being studied. I would see this requirement as being stronger than the fear of endangering the natural flow of social interaction by intervening. After all, the risk of actually damaging the very phenomena of cyberspace interpersonal dynamics that we are studying is constantly present (King, 1996: 120), making even an overly cautious approach more advisable than a thoughtless or heedless one.

On the other hand, the characteristics of online social interaction make it difficult to inform all the participants in an equal manner. Especially when acquiring informed consent, a reasonable approach would be to seek it only from the people one wants to quote extensively.

In conclusion, the researcher should always remember that even though some parts of the social interaction taking place in multiplayer communities might seem public, this does not remove the ethical requirements of the research. As a rule of thumb, members of multiplayer communities should always be informed when they are being studied, no matter what the purpose of the study is. As King (1996: 120) puts it, "*When the subjects believe they are in a private setting, the ethical dilemmas of a researcher surreptitiously gathering data can not be ignored*".

With regards to this study, discussion of when and how I chose to tell the other members of my communities about the research project is presented in sub-section 6.1.3.

## 3.3 Data collection and analysis

### 3.3.1 Interviews

It is usual that researchers have some sort of pre-knowledge or pre-suppositions concerning the topic of their study, even when they are not aware of them. That was also the case in this study, where I had extensive knowledge and experience of multiplayer games even before gathering the data. As stated before, while it would have been possible to base the analysis on the relevant research literature and the data collected through participant observation alone, I decided that a broader array of viewpoints would benefit the depth of the analysis. For this purpose I chose open-ended in-depth interviews.

One of the first concrete choices I made at the beginning of the research process was to try to include in the study the viewpoints of players of various kinds of multiplayer games. This decision was made before many other aspects of the study had been decided upon, such as when and where to gather the participant observation data. Consequently, I conducted the first interviews before starting participant observation and continued them throughout, making the last interview after the data-collection in Anarchy Online had ended. These interviews were conducted face-to-face.

During the participant observation I interviewed three members of the same communities to which I belonged. Two of these members were Finnish, enabling me to interview them face-to-face. Later on in the data-collection process I conducted one interview with a person outside Finland with the help of Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Unfortunately the community I belonged to during that time disbanded soon after, which together with the continuous flux of players in and out of the game itself effectively put an end to the strategy of face-to-face interviews I had chosen.

In this study the method chosen to reach interviewees was a variant of purposive (as opposed to random) sampling often called network (or snowball) sampling (see e.g. Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Frey et al., 2000: 274–276). In this type of selective inquiry, the first interviewees are often selected because of convenience, for example from among people who are somehow connected to the social surroundings of the researcher and thus easier to access. After conducting the interview, the interviewees are then asked for contact information of one or two other people they know who might be suitable informants for the study. There are at least two key benefits to this procedure. First, by utilizing the social networks of the interviewees, it is possible to expand the amount and scope of informants in an economic and effective manner. Second, especially in case of face-to-face interviews, it might be easier to convince the informants to agree to an interview if the researcher is recommended by a friend or an acquaintance.

In addition to the interviewees reached through network sampling, I conducted three interviews with members of the same multiplayer communities that I belonged to during the participant observation.

In this study, fifteen players of multiplayer games were interviewed. Thirteen of the interviewees were Finnish, and two were from other countries within Europe (Italy and Belgium). Three of those interviewed in this study were women. The age of the interviewees ranged from 18 to 31 years. Almost all of the interviewees played more than one kind of multiplayer computer game, and all of them had belonged to a group or a community in at least some of the games they played.

The interviews followed the format of typical naturalistic in-depth interviews. This meant that in order to gain understanding of those people's interpretations and experiences of various types of multiplayer communities, the interviews were kept relatively unstructured and dialogue-like (see e.g. Frey et al., 2001: 273–280). Each interview started with the interviewer explaining about the study and reminding the interviewees of their rights as participants in the study. The warm-up questions dealt with computer gaming experience and personal multiplaying preferences. After the warm-up questions, the interviewees were asked to talk about their most relevant multiplayer community experience or experiences. From this point on, the interviews proceeded in the form of a dialogue, where points presented by the interviewee were followed by subsequent questions by the interviewer asking for further descriptions. There was a list of approximately 30 base questions on the

operation of multiplayer communities that could be used in case the dialogue came to a halt for whatever reason. The questions were as follows:

- What is the community like? Tell me how it works.
- How was the community born?
- How long have you been a member of your current community?
- How did you get in? Do you have an established process for accepting new members?
- How do members usually leave the community?
- What is the age and gender division in your community?
- Is the community multicultural? If yes, how does this manifest itself in the game, do you notice it at all?
- What kind of age span do these communities have? That is, how long do they go on in your experience?
- What kind of goals does the community have?
- What do you get from being a member of the community? What does it mean to you?
- How well do you know the people who are in the same community as you?
- How important for the game and for the community is it to know the other players?
- How tight is the feeling of ”us” in your community? How does it manifest itself?
- How do the community members keep in contact?
- Does your community communicate actively with other communities? How?
- Why have you chosen these means of communication?
- Do you discuss matters not related to the game or the community within the community? If yes, what kinds of things do you discuss?
- How important do you think this kind of off-game interaction is to the functioning of the community within the game?
- How do you see your role within your community?
- What kinds of other roles are there?
- Is there competition inside the community? How does it show?
- Is there competition between your community and other communities? How does it show?
- What kind of habits do you have?
- What kind of rules do you have?
- If there are arguments or problems in the community, how are they solved?
- Who has the power to decide on matters concerning the whole community?
- On what grounds has this power been given?

These questions could be presented in any order, providing the researcher a chance to engage in any potentially interesting topic as they came up during the interviews. In effect the topics addressed in each interview varied according to the kinds of subjects the interviewees brought up during the conversation. The interviews were between 45 and 115 minutes in length.

Practically all of the descriptions of multiplayer communities were connected to online multiplayer *computer* games, as opposed to online multiplayer *console* games. Many of the interviewees played video games on a console, but since at the time of the interviews the network capabilities of consoles had not yet become popular in Finland, none of the interviewees had experience in online gaming with them. The types of games the interviewees played varied from MUDs to FPSs to MMOGs. Each of these game types offers various possibilities for communication and the number of people playing at any given time differs greatly. Also, the types of social networks to which the interviewees belonged and which operated around the multiplayer computer games are diverse in nature. Some of the communities have been alive for years,

while others have operated only for some months. The smaller communities comprised ten to twenty people, while others included almost the entire player base of that game. The latter case was only possible, though, when the game was not very popular, i.e. when the total number of players could be counted in the hundreds, not the thousands.

The interviews were transcribed using a standard word-processing program and a transcription program called *SoundScriber*. The transcription system used was not as detailed as is traditional in conversation analysis and similar research, but rather focused on the content of the speech. This means that the length of the pauses, for example, was omitted from the transcription. In total the transcripts used in the analyses amounted to 304 pages of font-size 12.

Knowing the relative rarity of female players, it was no surprise that only three of the interviewees for this study were women. During the analysis it became clear that in this particular set of data gender issues were not relevant enough to justify the possible risk associated with linking gender to the excerpts. Since for the matters discussed in this study the gender of the interviewee had little apparent consequence, I decided to hide the gender of the interviewees when quoting them.

An important feature of the snowball method of contacting interviewees is that the interviewer has little or no control over what kind of interviewees he or she will reach. Accordingly, the interviewees ended up representing a wide variety of multiplayer games, communities, and gaming styles. While some interviewees had belonged to multiple communities or did so at the time of the interview, there was usually one community that was the most recent and/or influential that we concentrated on during most of the interview. Table 1 presents a summary of the relevant characteristics of these multiplayer communities.

The reference to the game setting in Table 1 is at best an arbitrary one, since the field of multiplayer games is so varied. Practically all accounts of multiplayer games including communal activity belonged to one of the following four groups, which were also used in the table:

FPS (e.g. Team Fortress Classic, Counter Strike)
MMOG (e.g. Anarchy Online, Ultima Online)
MUD (including MOOs)
Other (e.g. Warcraft III, Diablo II, Hatrick)

For simplicity's sake the means of CMC being used in Table 1 are bundled into groups with unifying names. For example, one interviewee might have referred to *ICQ* and another to the *MSN Messenger* in their accounts. For the purposes of this study they are both seen as instant messaging systems or IMS for short. Similarly, all voice communications are put under the tag VoIP in this table, whether they use an internal feature of a game or an external application (such as *Team Speak* or *Ventrilo*). Ingame chat refers to those instances where the interviewee has stressed the importance of the text-based communication feature that operates within the game.

TABLE 1 Summary of the interviewees' most relevant multiplayer community experience

| **Game setting** | **Time as a member** | **Size of the community** | **Description of the community** | **Designated role of the interviewee (if any)** | **Usual means of contact (in order of relative importance)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| FPS | 1 year 3 months | 20 (10 active) | A competitive group. Meets to play five times a week at fixed times. | Leader | IRC, VoIP, IMS, F2F |
| MMO | 6 months | 10+ | A small, tight group where competition is frowned upon. | Leader | Ingame chat, Chat, VoIP, forum |
| FPS | 4 years | 20 | A long-lasting group with tight bonds between members and a competitive background. | Leader | IRC, VoIP, phone, F2F, email |
| MUD | 1 ½ years | uncertain | A loose collection of players within a MUD based on friendship. | | Ingame chat, email, forum |
| FPS | 1 year | uncertain | A small group. Fixed times for playing, competing weekly. | | F2F, email, WWW |
| FPS | 3 months | uncertain | A small group. Playing several times a week. Competitive and goal-oriented. | Match organizer | IRC, VoIP, phone, WWW |
| FPS | several years | 10-20 | A long-lasting competitive group. Many periods of quieter activity | | IRC, VoIP, phone |
| FPS | 6 months | uncertain | A casual collection of players who have earlier played competitively. | | IRC, F2F |
| Other | 6 months | 20+ | A cooperative clan. Most members represent a specific nationality (other than the interviewee's). | | Ingame chat |
| MMO | 5 months | 30+ | A cooperative group with a social atmosphere. | | Ingame chat, forum |
| Other | 1 year (in this game) | 10-15 | A tight group with strong ties. Activities across several games. | | Forum, WWW, F2F |
| MUD | years | ~200 | Both tighter groups of 3-5 players and the whole MUD as a community. | | Ingame chat, occasionally phone |
| Other | 8 months | 20+ | A socially oriented clan. Active in the larger gaming society, organizing tournaments. | Organizer | Chat, forum, WWW |
| MMO | 5 months | 30+ | A cooperative group with a social atmosphere. | | Ingame chat, forum |
| Other | | ~10 | A group of friends and acquaintances | | IRC, IMS, F2F |

As practically every multiplayer game has some sort of ingame chat implemented in it, practically all the communities presented here use it to some extent - it is just more important to some than to others. Chat, on the other hand, refers to an external chat application. Forums cover various kinds of asynchronic message boards that nowadays mostly operate as parts of WWW-pages, but can exist just as well within a game or even a BBS. The entry WWW in the table refers to web-pages of the community (or individual members). Web-pages are usually used as a blackboard for news or other information, and less for actual interaction even though this, too, is possible.

### 3.3.2 Log files

During the participant observation I logged on to the game what seemed to be countless times. Many of these gaming events, most notably some of those that took place before my acceptance in a community, yielded little or no data that was relevant from the perspective of studying social interaction within multiplayer communities. Some gaming sessions were so short that there was hardly any social interaction at all, and sometimes I ended up playing by myself for prolonged periods of time. I could for example play for an hour or two during the day, when most of the European players were at work or school and the players from North America were still asleep. Because of these differences in the gaming sessions I decided to concentrate my analysis on those events that showed the greatest promise for analysis. After eliminating those gaming events that clearly did not contribute to the overall goal of the study, altogether 32 gaming events from different times in 2004 were left as the core of the participant observation data.

The game program of Anarchy Online allows for automatic saving of log files during play. This is typical in various kinds of multiplayer games and means that the process of data-collection affects the participation of the researcher as little as possible. Typically, I had at least two chat channels open when playing. One of the chat channels was reserved for community-wide messages and the other one was used for whatever small group I happened to belong to during a particular gaming event. Communication on both of these channels was recorded onto log files.

Since the log files were recorded automatically, the program included within them a high amount of technical "noise" that had to be cleaned off the transcripts. For example, a conversation concerning a player's equipment in the game might include enough statistical data relevant to the game's mechanics to fill one sheet of A4 paper. For the purposes of this study it was sufficient to replace the technical information with a simple reminder of the types of equipment discussed. Once the transcripts were cleaned, they were then formatted to a more readable form using standard word-processing software. In total the cleaned transcripts used in the analyses amounted to 411 pages of font-size 12.

### 3.3.3 Field notes

The field notes I wrote during this study consisted mostly of two types of notes. First, I wrote observation notes, including accounts of how certain things happened. Typically, I wrote these notes after gaming sessions straight onto the log files. Second, I wrote personal notes, which consist mainly of feelings statements about the research process. (For information concerning different types of field notes see e.g. Richardson, 1994: 526.) A single note could also include both aspects, as illustrated by the next excerpt:

> **2.2. Monday** Gaming time two hours. I played at the end of the work-day, from three to five. There were surprisingly few people present at the server, and it was difficult to find company. It occurred to me that if a player lives in a different time zone than the majority of the other players, the gaming experience can be truly lonely. In addition I noticed once again how much easier it would be to fare well in the game if I would know more people. In the end I did manage to get company, though. I met another player of approximately my character's experience level, and we did some missions together. I also saved some of the conversation during this gaming event, but I started the "recording" only in the middle and had to stop it again when my gaming partner's line went dead for some reason. Well, anyway one more name to the friends-list! I still don't know how to propose someone's name into the friends-list myself, but at least until so far it hasn't been such a big problem. I seem to get "friends" rather steadily the way I'm playing.

The total amount of field notes is difficult to estimate, since I sometimes wrote short paragraphs straight onto the log files after a gaming event in order to better remember a certain incident or a general feeling. In addition, at the time of the data collection I was already actively writing the first versions of this study, meaning that many of the insights I had at the time were not recorded on a separate field notes file in the first place. The most relevant field notes that were used in the analysis were saved outside the log files as their own files. These notes translated into approximately 15 pages of text with a font size of 12.

### 3.3.4 Analysis and presentation of the data

After initial formatting all the data were imported into *Atlas.TI*, a qualitative analysis tool that enables large amounts of data to be categorized and handled with relative ease.

The analysis of the data followed an inductive approach. Inductive analysis looks at emerging patterns in the data. By revising the initial, tentative formulations throughout the data collection and analyzing process, the researcher tries to find and verify themes and patterns (Frey et. al., 2000: 281).

The analysis of the data sets consisted of many partly overlapping stages. The first step was to give the transcripts of both the interviews and the log files and notes from participant observation a cursory read-through. This served the purpose of identifying those parts of the data that were relevant to the topic of the study in order to reduce the data for inclusion in the analysis to those parts

that were most useful. For example, the interviews included instances of reminiscing about old computer games and the early years of computer networks without any actual references to multiplayer games or computer-mediated communication. At this point of analysis these kinds of paragraphs were left out in favor of concentrating on those more relevant to the subject of this study.

Then a more comprehensive coding took place, where each paragraph of text was examined more closely and classified systematically. Both interviews and data from the participant observation were coded separately into categories. This coding process followed a similar route to a grounded theory approach (e.g. Frey et. al., 2000: 281–282). By looking at the content of individual instances of the data I searched for commonalities among them. Instances sharing commonalities constituted a category, which was then given a name that separated it from other categories. The purpose of such an approach is to gradually reach a state where all the data belong to one or more categories. I then assembled the emergent categories into thematic groups.

In this coding process I strived to detach myself from the initial questions presented during the interviews and to approach the data "as is". While the original questions surely affected my interpretation of the themes into which I organized the data, I feel that the end result is more varied and stresses many such angles of the multiplayer community process that were not evident at the beginning of the research process, when I depended on my previous knowledge of the phenomenon that I had from earlier research and my own experiences.

On a similar note, even though I strived to analyze the two data sets separately, there was inevitably a sort of interaction taking place between them. This is because analytical induction is actually a mix of inductive and deductive analysis, resulting from the fact that when a theme or pattern is identified within the data (inductive), the next step that the analyst takes is to try to verify it, to confirm the finding (deductive). After this step a new inductive cycle begins. (Huberman & Miles, 1994: 431.) This process was especially evident for me in the way the analysis of the interview data affected the analysis of the participant observation data, and vice versa. Even though I kept the data sets separate and at the end of the analysis process their relevant categories or themes were congruent only partly, working on them sometimes simultaneously ensured that the analysis of neither occurred in a vacuum. Actually, the way the two data sets "talked" to each other was a positive influence on the whole analysis process, as more than once a revelation in one data set sparked a revelation in the other one.

**Interviews**

Table 2 shows the results of the analysis of the interviews arranged under their respective chapters in this study. This arrangement was reached after the initial categorizing by bundling the individual categories into larger thematic groups. For example, there were several categories that dealt with issues concerning why and how a player might enroll in a multiplayer community. These

TABLE 2 The categories derived from analyzing the interviews, linked to their respective chapters

| Categories | Chapter |
|---|---|
| Audio-visual, i.e. voice over IP 14<br>Other CMC modes of communication 48<br>Meeting face-to-face 25 | 4 multiplayer games as a setting for social interaction |
| The problematic concept of community 16<br>Multiplicity of communities 1 | 5 Community in virtual worlds |
| 6 A journey to the center of the multiplayer world | |
| Community's support for an individual member 12<br>Community-related motives of an individual 34<br>On becoming a member 21 | 6.1 In search of a home |
| The birth of a community 17<br>Community's goals 25<br>Competitiveness 21<br>Game affecting community 24<br>Communication between communities 11<br>Gamers building the game 1 | 6.2 Knotting together the community network |
| Matters related to age and gender 29<br>Internationality 18<br>Monetary issues 1<br>Use of time 22<br>Face-to-face relationships 11<br>Identity and making acquaintance 12<br>Dealing with face-to-face matters 16<br>Meeting face-to-face 25 | 6.3 Who were we all? Questions of identity |
| Roles 38<br>Inner circle 11<br>Need for active participation 3<br>Meaning of leadership 1 | 6.4 Roles in multiplayer communities |
| Power and decision making 28<br>Rules and sanctions 21<br>Jargon 9<br>Rituals 7<br>(Expressions of) feeling of community 40<br>Significance of socializing 20 | 6.5 At the heart of community |
| Tensions (within and without) 13<br>Conflicts 21<br>Negative aspects of community 2<br>A member leaving 15<br>Disbanding a community 13<br>The lifetime of multiplayer communities 10 | 6.6 One day it fell apart - multiplayer communities disbanding |

categories were gathered together and formed the core of section *6.1 In search of a home*. Naturally, many categories included elements relevant for several chapters simultaneously, but there was usually one larger thematic group they best fit into.

At the end of each category there is a number reflecting the number of incidences the themes within that category were represented in the interview-data. As is typical of qualitative studies, the frequency of a theme is no guarantee of its significance. Still the numbers give a general view of how often the various themes came up in the interview data.

**Log files**

When coding the log files into categories, it soon became apparent that not every line of the more than four hundred pages could be coded separately. Rather, I bundled several utterances together wherever possible, so that for example a greeting that involved five players and six separate utterances or lines of text were coded together as one entry. This way of coding means, though, that the amount of individual instances within a code reveal even less information on the code than usually in qualitative research. For this reason, the exact number of incidences within each code are not presented here in the same way they were presented with the interview-data. After the initial categorizing I searched for similarities within them, combining the incidents into larger thematic groups much in the same way as the interview categories were grouped together.

In Table 3 the types of talk evident in the data are listed under three headlines that represent the relative amount of times the themes were touched upon in the ingame conversations. The themes listed under "common" came up approximately ten times as often as the themes listed "rare". Furthermore, the themes listed "abundant" came up abut twenty or more times more often than the "rare" themes, with the notable exception of task-related discussion, which alone was more prominent than all the other types of talk put together.

What it is important to understand when looking at the themes presented in Table 3 is that all of the types of talk could serve a community-building function. This was especially evident when community members were interacting, but even in those instances that I played without any community members in ad-hoc groups in the game, I ended up interpreting the social interaction through my experiences as a member of a community. It was possible, for example, that my interpretations of what took place outside the community ended up affecting my identification with the community, for example in those cases where the experiences with non-members were negative.

TABLE 3 General themes of talk evident in the log files, grouped according to relative frequency of occurrence

| **Themes of talk in the log files** | **Frequency of occurrence** |
|---|---|
| Talk governing the flow of the game<br>Game task-related talk, including general information sharing concerning the game<br>Social chit chat, including humoristic remarks<br>Greeting and saying goodbye<br>Navigation within the virtual space<br>Negotiating group goals | Abundant |
| Asking for help or helping other members<br>Character-related information sharing<br>References to face-to-face reality | Common |
| Questions of identity (who owns what character etc.)<br>Sharing technical info (for example on a game's commands or solving computer problems)<br>Conflict-talk<br>Asserting values or goals of the community<br>Story-telling | Rare |

The vast majority of the flow of communication during any single playing event was constituted of three of the most common types of talk presented above: talk governing the flow of the game, game task-related talk, and social chit chat. These types of talk were especially prevalent on the chat channels of the ad-hoc groups that were formed in order to complete a mission in the game, although they were also present on the community chat channel. Because the discussion later on concentrates mostly on the rarer types of talk, and for the sake of understanding the forms of talk in the context where the participant observation took place, it is relevant to go through a short patch of typical in-game talk.

Of the general flow of communication within the game's chat channels, a large amount was dedicated to governing the general flow of the game. Such talk could be seen as keeping communication channels open, and helping to create a feeling of presence. Such talk included, for example, accounts of what was taking place within the game. The closest equivalent in a face-to-face setting might be small children's play talk, where a small child explains his or her actions as if from the outside: "*This one would now open the door, and then this one would go inside to play.*"

Furthermore, there was much task-related communication that had to do with the game's dynamics, such as negotiations concerning the goals of the group and how the group could best achieve them. Talk related to game

dynamics typically included descriptions of what was happening in the group and other short messages that were used to govern the flow of the game. For example, if one member of a group was under attack, he or she often warned other group members about it or asked for assistance.

The most typical functions of communication included short messages such as "Ding!", which was used to signal gaining a level and usually resulted in the other members of the group congratulating the one who advanced a level,; exclamations such as "wait", "ok", or "r" (for "ready") which were used to signal whether the player was ready for the next batch of opponents; and "add", which was used to signal that one or more monster had joined the fray. The next excerpt shows a very typical group session in progress over a thirteen-minute time-frame. During these thirteen minutes, the group was fighting hectically against many monsters and almost ended up being killed by some of them. As one can see from the example, communication between players is of necessity short and concentrates around pragmatic issues when playing the game requires much conscious effort:

19:22: [Team] Kegger: r
19:22: [Team] Rdon: r
19:24: [Team] Groo: a sec
19:24: [Team] Moluk: ¨wait
19:24: [Team] Kegger: k
19:24: [Team] Moluk: back
19:27: [Team] Kegger: ding
19:27: [Team] Moluk: gz
19:27: [Team] Rdon: ding
19:27: [Team] Rdon: gz
19:27: [Team] Kegger: tks
19:27: [Team] Kegger: gratz rdon
19:28: [Team] Kegger: wait one
19:28: [Team] Groo: wait
19:28: [Team] Groo: ok
19:28: [Team] Kodo: wow nice dimatch ^^

["dimatch" here refers to a special move that one player's character executed and that, on this specific occasion did very much damage to the opponent of the group.]

19:28: [Team] Kegger: thank you
19:30: [Team] Moluk: ding
19:30: [Team] Rdon: gz
19:30: [Team] Kegger: gratz
19:30: [Team] Kodo: advance guys
19:32: [Team] Kegger: wait one
19:32: [Team] Groo: wait
19:32: [Team] Kegger: wait
19:33: [Team] Kegger: need to recharge nano

["nano" was a term used in the game to describe the resource that fuelled certain types of character classes similar to magic users in a fantasy setting. If a character was

out of nano, that character's abilities could not be used before the nano was restored, for example by resting.]

19:33: [Team] Moluk: who is doc?
19:33: [Team] Kegger: groo
19:34: [Team] Groo: uhoh
19:35: [Team] Moluk: heal
19:35: [Team] Groo: retreat
19:35: [Team] Groo: non nano
19:35: [Team] Groo: ok, good
19:35: [Team] Groo: wait, reloading
19:35: [Team] Moluk: uhh that was close

Other typical functions of game task-related messages included asking for directions and trying to locate other group members, discussing the requirements for completing tasks, discussing the loot and how to divide it within the group, and discussing technical details, such as how to execute certain commands or how to make the game run more smoothly.

Most of the types of talk discussed above were typically repetitive in nature, occurring time and time again in similar form and content. As such, they constituted the vast majority of all communication in the in-game chat channels. There were also one-off instances and events during which communication between members was more intense content-wise, and less scripted.

**Presentation of the data**

Throughout this study, excerpts from both the interview data and the log files are presented whenever illustrative for the topic. These excepts have been modified in several ways.

Since thirteen of the fifteen interviews were conducted in Finnish, they had to be translated into English by the author of this study. The single interview that was conducted through IRC was formatted to resemble spoken interviews where necessary. I recognize that this does some harm to the original interview, but the excerpts from this interview were otherwise too easy to distinguish from the others. Similarly, the name, age, and gender of the interviewees were omitted to ensure anonymity. The reasoning behind this choice was twofold. First, the small amount of female interviewees made them relatively easy to pick out from the rest. Second, in the end neither age nor gender provided any significant analytical insight. These personal data were replaced with Informant A, Informant B, and so forth. Furthermore, in order to make the substance of the quotation clear, spelling and grammar were corrected when necessary.

The log files were modified in a similar fashion. The pseudonyms of individual players and the name of the communities in question have been replaced with similar sounding equivalents. In addition, when using log file excerpts later on in this study I use by default the log files from the community

channels, as they often provided more relevant data for the purposes of this study. In those cases that I use excerpts from a group channel I have included a small marker [Team] in front of the chat messages stating what channel the communication took place in.

# 4 MULTIPLAYER GAMES AS A SETTING FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION

The first stop on our quest to understand the dynamics of social interaction within multiplayer communities is to establish a point-of-view towards multiplayer games as a setting. When speaking of computer games, it might not be intuitively clear that multiplayer computer games can function as a rich backdrop to socially oriented interaction. As Hand and Moore (2006) point out, especially within the domain of popular media, digital gaming has often been labeled as *"*[…] *an anti-social activity divorced from the routine and "normal" contexts of everyday life"* (2006: 166). However, there is a substantial body of literature from various academic disciplines pointing out that quite the opposite seems to be the case. Researchers from various fields of science have looked at player-to-player communication in different types of multiplayer gaming, such as MUDs (e.g. Reid, 1996; Schiano & White, 1998; Cherny, 1999; Utz, 2000), MMOGs (e.g. Tosca, 2002; Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Taylor, 2006), and first person shooter games (e.g. Manninen, 2001; Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2002; Manninen & Kujanpää, 2005), among others. Indeed, digital gaming overlaps with other forms of social networks and not only co-exists with them, but manages to produce novel forms of communication and cultural activity as well (see also Hand & Moore, 2006: 166).

The discussion within this chapter concentrates mainly on computer-mediated communication because of its prevalence in the data sets used in this study. Both communities where the participant observation took place and most of the examples from the interviewees' accounts operate solely through computer-mediated communication, with some mentions of other technologically mediated ways of communication making random appearances. In many such multiplayer communities it is not an option to meet other players face-to-face because of geographical limitations, or it is not deemed necessary by the community members. On the other hand, there are several examples both within the data sets of this study and from outside its scope of multiplayer communities having a strong face-to-face element to their operation. Thus,

issues regarding face-to-face communication are also taken into account when necessary. The discussion presented here does not intend to imply a normative comparison between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication, something that has been prevalent in the early discourse surrounding CMC. Rather, the main point is that multiplayer games offer a context for a variety of ways in which people can relate to each other.

The chapter starts by analyzing issues related to computer-mediated communication in general and then moves on to discuss the various special characteristics of CMC that are evident in a multiplayer gaming context. After that, motivations that drive people to play multiplayer games and to reach out to other players are considered. The contents of this chapter, as well as future chapters, are results from the analysis conducted within this research project mirrored against earlier research.

## 4.1 Computer-mediated communication

Computer-mediated communication can be seen as residing within the broader concept of technologically mediated communication. When talking of computer-mediated communication, technology is typically understood as more than just the array of technical devices at our disposal. Rather, computer-mediated communication can be seen as, "[…] *the process through which humans create, maintain, and transform meaning by interacting as users of computerized systems of communication*" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 249).

While the concept of computer-mediated communication is relatively broad, encompassing various forms of CMC such as IRC, e-mail, and VoIP (Voice over IP), there are a number of qualities that they all share. These qualities include interactivity, hypertextuality, multimedia, and convergence across various forms of communication, among others (for a complete review, see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 249). In essence, CMC is a multimodal and dynamic context of human interaction.

As computer-mediated communication has become more general, so there have been an increasing amount of studies concerning it. During the 1990s, several academic quarterly journals touching on the subject appeared, along with a plethora of books, conferences, and scientific organizations. Studies on the social aspects of multiplayer games got some of this attention, too, even though it has remained a relatively small niche within the grand landscape of CMC research.

When trying to understand multiplayer communities from a communication perspective, it is beneficial to start by taking a broader look at the literature on CMC before narrowing down to those issues that are more context specific. It is certainly possible that certain characteristics of social interaction, or certain dynamics of social organization, might be relevant only because of the special nature of the topic of study. Still, much of what we have

learned when studying social interaction in CMC in general can be applied across various contexts, including online multiplayer computer games.

Starting from the 1970's and until well into the 1990's, research on computer-mediated communication suggested that there was little prospect of building and maintaining social relationships online. At the time, the realm of computer-mediated communication consisted mostly of media such as electronic mail (email), bulletin board systems (BBSs), various newsgroups (i.e. Usenet), and MUDs. The heavy reliance on text of these media seemed to narrow the communication channels available, stripping them of social context cues routinely used in face-to-face communication and thus making them apparently unsuitable for the creation and maintenance of deep and meaningful social relationships. Such thoughts can be seen behind theories and viewpoints such as *Cues filtered out* (e.g. Culnan & Markus, 1987), *Media richness* (e.g. Daft & Lengel, 1984), and *Social presence* (e.g. Rice, 1993). Much of the research leading to these conclusions was conducted through experimental studies on decision-making in groups.

These technology-dependent views of communication have since received criticism (for a review, see e.g. Chenault, 1998; Walther & Parks, 2002), as the attention of researchers has turned towards actual experience and the practices that people engage in when in contact with one another through technologically-mediated means. This is not to say that researchers have totally abandoned the view of communication media affecting social interaction. Rather, the field of communication research has come to terms with the notion that people do seem to be able to build and maintain significant and meaningful social relationships through computer-mediated communication, even if the actual processes through which they are formed and maintained might differ from their face-to-face equivalents (see e.g. Walther, 2006). In short, though no-one denies that the range of computer-mediated cues differs from the range of cues that we have available "naturally" in face-to-face communication situations, it seems that people's ability to adapt can overcome many of the circumstances that were previously seen as obstacles.

One theory that represents well the general idea presented above is the Social Information Processing theory (SIP) introduced by Joseph Walther in the 1990s (Walther, 1993; 1996). SIP asserts that the fact that communication occurs in a technologically mediated environment has potentially only a limited effect on relationships. According to the theory, the communicators' intentions can overcome outside influences such as channel or media effects. This is made possible by communicators adapting their communication behavior in order to overcome the possible limitations of a given mode of communication.

For example, from the point of view of relationship development one of the only significant changes between CMC and face-to-face context is the time it takes to develop a relationship. It is possible that when a relationship is new or just developing, people might have difficulties expressing themselves and interpreting the other party. Nevertheless, with time people usually learn to utilize the communication possibilities at hand in a varied enough way to

overcome these initial difficulties. The important aspect this theory emphasizes is that of time; in order to share social information and develop their relationship, communication partners need time as well as an anticipated, foreseeable future for the relationship.

Central to SIP, then, is the notion that computer-mediated communication is just as capable of sharing impressions and managing relational communication as face-to-face communication. This premise is based on the idea that verbal and nonverbal cues used to service social functions can be substituted with others over a prolonged period of time. For example, verbal cues in CMC can at times comparably substitute for vocalic and kinesic cues in face-to-face interaction (Walther, 2006).

Another insightful concept introduced by Walther in the early 1990s is the idea of hyperpersonal relationship development. This concept attempts to explain why communication partners who have only a limited amount of information about each other can sometimes reach a heightened sense of intimacy faster than in face-to-face settings, where the amount of information on which impressions are based is larger. Basically what happens is that when people do not have access to the kind of information about the other party that they normally would have at their disposal, they unconsciously make up this information by using existing references they have, for example their image of themselves. For example, it is typical for participants in CMC to think that their communication partners are very much like them, until proven otherwise. These impressions can lead to a heightened sense of commonality between communication partners, sometimes ending with interpersonal relationships being formed exceptionally fast - hence the term hyperpersonal (Walther, 1993; 1996).

Another factor that helps to understand how and why people communicating in a CMC environment can form seemingly close bonds at a relatively quick pace is the relative anonymity communication networks can offer and the feeling of security that they help to bolster. The next excerpt illustrates both hyperpersonality and the effect of anonymity:

> "But still, in the Internet, for example I already communicate with some, for example a new guy comes in the chat. I already tend to communicate with him as if I knew him even though I have never seen him. "Hi, how are you", and he says, "I'm fine, what about you? You want to play?" "Let's play." It's really kind of nice the way you communicate with these people. Then if they say stupid things, okay, you don't want to, but usually you tend to … I don't usually say anything, like in real life, I mean for example when a new guy comes to a shop and says "Hi, how are you", you don't really do that, you don't usually. But I don't know why in the Internet you do. Maybe because you feel safe. Because you can actually run away from this guy, he has never seen you, you are behind a monitor and he is probably thousands of miles away from you. You can say "Hi, how are you." And if he says "Fuck you", then it's, hey, it's okay (laughs)."
> (Interviewee F)

The general impact of face-to-face communication for dispersed groups and teams is still under debate (for a review, see Connaughton & Daly, 2005). There are many who speak on behalf of face-to-face communication over technologically mediated communication, especially when it comes to initially building relationships. Also in the context of multiplayer communities, there is often a yearning to meet other members of the community in person, as we shall see later on in section 4.2. Still, for many multiplayer communities and their members, face-to-face meetings are not an option for a variety of reasons, such as geographical distance. Geographical distance can lead to dependence on CMC as the only means to maintain community ties. In the next excerpt, the interviewee compares the benefits and limitations of face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication:

> "Well, at least the nicest part about being online is that if someone starts to bore you, you can change the scene. And usually you can find a place from there where you can express yourself better than in the previous place where things went wrong, or the people were not interesting anymore or so. That you can change the virtual environment so easily. I believe that at least with me it has been one of the reasons why, but on the other hand it sometimes happens that you run into people who are interesting in themselves, and you sort of hope that you could remain friends. But in practice it is usually so that when you haven't seen the other, and perhaps haven't discussed meaningful things, things outside the game, well I believe that those are the kinds of reasons why those relationships don't last."
> (Interviewee H)

Surely the amount and type of cues at hand have an impact on many aspects of communication, for example on the impressions we construct of others, and on the way we make decisions. For example, there is evidence that in certain situations using a sound connection (voice) can have a positive impact on the communication process by improving social judgments and making it easier to maintain the mutuality of interaction. Voice has also been considered to affect positively both the feeling of social presence and the willingness to co-operate. (Jensen, Farnham, Drucker & Kollock 2000.) On the other hand, simply adding to the number and scope of available modes of communication does not necessarily have a positive impact in all situations. For example, the addition of more information such as pictures in a CMC environment might encourage people to make more positive evaluations of their communication partners in short-term relationships. In long-term relationships, and especially when the parties to the relationship have already gotten used to communicating by different means, i.e. through text, the addition of pictures might actually affect those same evaluations negatively. (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001.)

Contemporary every-day relationships and social networks operate in a multimodal communication environment, where they can utilize many varying modes of communication. When looking at communication across the whole range of possibilities, what seems important is that the *contact* between people is similar, even if the dynamics of building and maintaining relationships might

differ. One cannot simplistically say that one means of communication would be better than others in every given situation.

## 4.2 Communication within the context of multiplayer games

Players of multiplayer games engage in social interaction both within and outside the games themselves. For example, players might form and maintain ties through face-to-face communication, by using the telephone, or the myriad possibilities that typical multiplayer games offer. It is possible for players to communicate wholly oustide the game they are playing. Still, it is typical for players to utilize the communication possibilities offered by their chosen multiplayer games at least to some extent. This section concentrates especially on the kinds of possibilities for communication evident within and around multiplayer games in a computer-mediated setting. Instant-messaging systems, bulletin boards, e-mail, chat, and VoIP-applications all exist in some form or another within multiplayer games. In the next paragraphs, examples of both verbal and nonverbal communication within the framework of multiplayer games are analyzed.

**Communicating through text**

Practically all online multiplayer games include at least one inbuilt communication system capable of transmitting text messages. Indeed, it is not rare for a game to feature many such systems overlapping each other. A common example of such a communication system is a chat or a message board that is integrated into the game. These systems usually make it possible to 1) send messages to either all the participants of the game, or all the participants of the game that are within a certain distance in the gaming world, 2) send messages between a selected group, and 3) send messages to individual players. Within typical MMOGs and MUDs the first function might be achieved through common message boards or by "shouting" in the game, where the message a player types will be transmitted to all characters within a certain distance in the game world. The second function is typically used by groups and communities who want to benefit from mass-posting a message but at the same time want to select carefully who receives it, no matter where their character might reside in the game world. The third function, person-to-person communication, is typically referred to as "tell". These "tells" function much like an instant message system or e-mail application would, reaching their recipient regardless of their position in the game world.

In the multiplayer game where the participant observation of this study took place, Anarchy Online, all three possibilities were present. Figure 2 depicts one possible way of customizing the user interface. The contents and placement of each window could be adjusted by the player. First, the upper-left hand

corner of the picture shows a "friends list", where individual characters names are listed. Selecting a name from the list opens up a chat window (1) that can be used to contact that person. At the bottom of the picture there are two further chat windows open. The upper one of these (2) includes the community chat channel. Typing messages into this window makes them visible to all community members online, regardless of their position within the game world. The window at the very bottom (3) is reserved for messages produced by the game, such as notifications of hits and misses during a fight, messages coming from characters in the immediate physical/virtual vicinity in the game world, and messages coming from the members of the ad-hoc groups that can be formed in the game in order to achieve various goals. In a typical gaming situation, many of these modes of communication are used simultaneously. In effect, the ability to multitask one's communication can be crucial to one's gaming experience.

Communication through text should not be seen as a simple translation of face-to-face verbal communication into written form. Some phenomena related to textual communication in computer-mediated contexts such as multiplayer


FIGURE 2 The user interface of Anarchy Online highlighting the various means of communicating through text

games have their own dynamics that cannot be understood with face-to-face experience alone. Two typical examples of such phenomena are *idling* and *gagging*. When idling, a person keeps his or her character in the game but does not do anything with it. In such a case, the character just stays still and does not react to anyone's approaches. One can also easily fake idling, and choose not to react to another player's approaches if one does not want to be in contact with that person. As long as the idling character is not performing any actions, the other player has no way of knowing if the person guiding the character is really present or not. The second example, gagging, refers to an ability to command the program to cease transmitting messages from a particular character. In some cases, it is also possible to totally block an unwanted person out of one's field of perception, effectively making that person nonexistent for the party that initiated the gagging command. (Further elaboration of both idling and gagging can be found for example in Curtis, 1997.)

**Vocal communication**

Many multiplayer games offer the possibility of vocal communication between players. In addition, there are various stand-alone programs that can be made to run in the background of the game for the same purpose. The reasons for using such communication systems are manifold. Sometimes players feel that writing is slow in comparison to speaking, or that the gameplay might require the player to keep both hands on the controls of the game instead of using them for typing:

> "For example, in Diablo the voice communication is really bad. People there don't use Ventrilo or Roger Wilco or anything like that, even though it would be possible and it would really add to the game, if only because people playing Diablo are usually using a broadband. And writing while playing is really awkward."
> (Interviewee A)

Vocal communication is strongly established in certain gaming cultures. It seems that technologies based on voice are especially popular around those multiplayer games that have a fast tempo and/or require extensive co-operation between a small group of players.

Communication through text has kept its position as the most popular method of communication within most multiplayer games in spite of the emergence of various technologies of voice transmit. There can be various reasons for this. Especially with multiplayer games' ever-growing needs for bandwidth and computing power, players often value smooth and uninterrupted gameplay over the possible benefits of hearing the voice of his or her teammates. In addition, many multiplayer games do not have voice communication possibilities integrated into them. The need for an external program might present too high a threshold for some players' technical equipment, evident in the game slowing down or becoming unstable. The game where the participant observation of this study was conducted, Anarchy

Online, was one such game without an integrated VoIP application. In cases where there are dozens of players whose communication partially overlaps it can be a more economical solution to use text instead of trying to negotiate a speaking order in order; otherwise there might be chaos. There might also be language issues, as one's writing skills in a foreign language do not necessarily correlate with one's speaking skills, as testified by one of the Finnish interviewees:

> "With something like Voice Comm [a VoIP utility], the quality is really unclear. You try to mutter bad English there, or then there's the other option of there being someone who's really English and speaks his own dialect and it is just unintelligible."
> (Interviewee F)

There might be several other reasons as well for the prevalence of text over voice, such as the ease with which text can be re-read, manipulated, copy-pasted, and shortened without its meaning suffering too drastically.

**Jargon in multiplayer games**

As is typical of any fairly closed group of people, players of multiplayer games use jargon, a sort of informal terminology, when speaking with one another. Jargon was an integral part of both data sets of this study. The participant observation data included numerous incidents where jargon was evident. In addition, references to jargon surfaced over and over again in the interviews. Overall, jargon in multiplayer communities could be divided into four broad categories. First, every player must know the basics of netiquette should they want to be taken seriously as members of a multiplayer gaming community. Abbreviations for actions such as *afk* and *lol*, and those that are connected to behavioral norms such as no *spamming*[14] or *trolling*[15] are usually just as valid within a multiplayer game as they are within any other computer-mediated context.

Second, multiplayer gaming as a context involves the use of certain expressions that appear relatively unchanged from game to game. These expressions usually start in one game and then move onto other games with the natural flow of players immigrating from one game to another. These pervasive

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14 Sending repeatedly the same message or an empty message that disrupts the normal flow of communication.

15 A troll is typically seen as an outsider who enters a community and behaves intentionally provocatively in order to create ill feelings and conflicts.

multiplayer gaming-related expressions include for example *pvp*[16], *camping*[17], and *training*[18].

Third, most multiplayer games have their own jargon. These game-specific expressions might include abbreviations for certain non-player characters, quests or patterns of behavior, among others. In Anarchy Online, typical game-specific expressions were *SL*, referring to an expansion of the game called "Shadowlands" and *QL*, referring to a so-called quality level of an in-game item such as a pistol or a piece of clothing. Because of the often elaborate nature of these terms, many games offer dictionaries to new players in order to help them learn the language needed to socialize with other players. Anarchy Online was no different in this respect as it offered a dictionary of the most necessary jargon on the game's website.

Fourth, a single multiplayer group or community might have its own set of terms that only its members understand. This kind of jargon is often the most elusive to outsiders and requires deep involvement with the community to be understood. For example, players might call a public meeting on "the Hill" without specifying which of the hundreds or thousands of hills of the game world they mean.

As is typical of jargon, failure to understand these game-specific terms is an easy way to distinguish a new player, often called a *newbie*, from a more experienced one. On the other hand, some interviewees said that it can be difficult to keep up with jargon because of the quick pace with which it can change. Additionally, one can sometimes tell how old or experienced a user of computer networks someone is just by looking at the way they use jargon:

> "Well, you, if you stay away from the Internet community, you will get into trouble. Because this language evolves. So, for example when ages ago we used to say ROTFL, nowadays they use LOL, so basically it is very rare to see ROTFL anymore. And if you see it, you know that this is an older guy. Sometimes you can make out the age like that. And that is only one thing. For example, in the gaming world they call someone GOZU, it is a pro player who is really good. So sometimes they say that "Oh, I'm not a G-player". And you don't know what the hell is a G-player, if you don't know it is a GOZU! That is, I'm not really good. […] For example now when you start playing in Battle.net, they always say "GL HF!" If you don't know what the hell that is, it is "Good Luck, Have Fun!" After a while you learn. But if you stay away from the multiplayer world, when you go back, you go mad. Because it is changing all the time."
> (Interviewee E)

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16 Player versus player, usually a game mode where player's characters combat each other

17 Camping is a term used to describe a player or players who do not move but choose to wait in one place for something to happen. "Camping" is often seen as a negative activity, especially if it deprives other players of options that would otherwise be open to them.

18 In MMOGs it is common for the computer-guided monsters to follow up on a character after they have become aggravated. A character running away from these monsters might end up "pulling a train" of many monsters behind him or her. Training can be highly disruptive to other players, as any character that encounters a train might be killed due to the sudden appearance of a mob of aggravated monsters.

As an interesting side note, it seems that while most multiplayer game jargon has its roots in textual communication, as seen in the prevalence of short abbreviations, some of these terms find their way into spoken language as well. As one interviewee said when talking about one of the most common abbreviations evident across the scope of computer-mediated contexts:

> "(laughs) It is the ever-disgusting "lol", best of all is when someone says it into a mic. It's like a really depressed "lol", that makes you fall out of your chair at the other end. Someone being not the least bit amused but trying to express it anyway."
> (Interviewee A)

**Nonverbal communication and avatars**

The basic idea behind many MUDs and MMOGs has been to create a virtual world, complete with as many life-like qualities as possible. This quest for (pseudo)realism has also included communication possibilities. As one designer of such virtual worlds expressed it, according to Taylor (2003a: 29), the purpose of design is to "*Give people as many handles, as many ways to be expressive* [as possible]". It is only natural, then, that the possibilities for expressing oneself by means of nonverbal communication are especially rich in many multiplayer games.

Most multiplayer games give the player some sort of an *avatar* to control. Typically, an avatar is seen as a user's representation of him or herself within the game world. Avatars come in many shapes and sizes, ranging from graphically depicted three-dimensional humanoids to an icon of a space ship to a paragraph of text. Figure 2 on page 60 shows an avatar from the game Anarchy Online. As is typical of many multiplayer game genres such as MUDs, FPS-games and MMOGs, each player controls one avatar at a time. It is technically possible to control more than one avatar at a time, for example by having two separate game applications open at the same time or even by using two computers located side-by-side, but most games include either an implicit norm or an outspoken rule prohibiting such behavior. In its broad sense, the word avatar includes the concept of a personality tied to it. This kind of implication expands the use of the word towards questions of identity and how members of multiplayer communities perceive each other as social beings, as discussed later in section 6.3. Because I wanted to avoid these kinds of implications when discussing matters that can take place even outside the sphere of established personalities, I have chosen to use the word *character* here instead.

Starting with MUDs, the inclusion of descriptions of gestures and other ways of communicating emotion, dubbed as *emotes*, enabled players to easily enrich their communication in a way that fitted the game without drastically reducing immersion in the game world. In its simplest form, a game might include a script that would process a command given by the player and output it for other players to see. For example, a player with a character named "Groo"

could write a simple command "smile" to his or her console, and the game would output it as "Groo is smiling."

With the introduction of elaborate graphical virtual worlds in the 1990s, multiplayer games started to have graphically depicted emotes in addition to textually mediated ones. The basic mechanism has remained similar, though. By using scripting, otherwise complex combinations of sounds, gestures, and movements of the game character are made as easy as possible to execute. These nonverbal communication possibilities have led to interesting forms of interaction within multiplayer games, with events such as dancing competitions breaking the mould of a strictly task-oriented game. Indeed, seemingly small additions to the game code such as nonverbal cues and the ability to customize one's trademark graphical symbol (a *tag*) have been used by players to express themselves in creative ways, often unintended or unanticipated by game developers (see e.g. Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2002 for an example of the creative actions of players).

Some contemporary massively multiplayer games have a truly impressive array of nonverbal gestures. In *Star Wars Galaxies*, for example, there are 340 *socials* or nonverbal gestures available (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004). The very latest multiplayer games make full use of the increased computing capabilities available, offering characters whose breath steams when it is cold, who blink, and have a multitude of expressions.

As with jargon, there are norms or codes of conduct that govern the use of nonverbal communication in multiplayer games. Most of these are general in nature, being valid across the scope of games that enable players to express themselves through characters' nonverbal cues. Typically, the code of conduct warns players against causing unhappiness to other players by their behavior. For example, repeatedly bringing one's character too close to or on top of another player's characters might be interpreted as a hostile move. The norms that guide behaviour and the game code that enables and limits activities in a game are often in a state of constant negotiation in multiplayer games. For example, the range of emotes can be altered by the game developers should there arise a problem with their use. An example of such an event in Anarchy Online was when players discovered that by repeatedly executing a backward flip so fast that the first flip had barely started before the second one was already on the way, the character appeared to be performing forceful pelvic movements. This behavior was then used to harass other characters sexually. After complaints that spilled onto the message boards of the game, the game's developers changed the code to remove this possibility.

In conclusion, nonverbal communication in multiplayer games is an area of much interest. Indeed, in many forms of multiplayer games most of the interaction between players can be seen as being based on nonverbal behavior and other non language-centered actions (Manninen, 2003).

## Connecting across time and space - Media use

There is a wide array of modes of communication available for multiplayer communities. Practically every multiplayer game where cooperation or competition between players is encouraged offers integrated means of contacting other players. In addition, the realm of multiplayer games is not separate from the contemporary landscape of technologically mediated communication. Players routinely use the full array of web-based forums, IRC, e-mail, IMS, phones, and videoconferencing when contacting their playing partners during and between gaming events.

Multiplayer communities differ in the extent and ways in which they employ technologically mediated communication when keeping in touch with each other. In a word, their degree of "virtuality" varies in a similar way to the continuum presented by Connaughton and Daly in Table 4 (2005: 193). There are those multiplayer communities that consist of dozens of people who have never met each other face-to-face, who reside in different countries and time zones, and who organize the whole community effort with the help of chat-applications, online forums, and e-mail. There are also those multiplayer communities whose membership comes from within one country, meets regularly face-to-face, phones each other, and possibly comes together to play from time to time. Naturally, every possible variation between and beyond such examples exists as well.

TABLE 4 The varying degrees of "virtuality" (Connaughton & Daly, 2005: 193)

| **Degree of virtuality continuum** | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Less virtual* | *Highly virtual* |
| Richness of communication media | meet face-to-face occasionally | Meet face-to-face rarely or never |
| | Use (desktop) video-conferencing often | Use email or instant messenger primarily |
| | Use Teleconferencing or telephone often | |
| Geographical separation | Leaders and members located in different buildings in the same city | Leaders and members dispersed globally |
| Temporal separation | Leaders and members located in the same time zone | Leaders and members located in multiple time zones |

The interviewees of this study used multiple modes of communication when keeping in touch with their multiplayer communities (Table 5). Typically, interviewees claimed to make extensive use of the communication possibilities embedded in the multiplayer games they were playing. Because of its prevalence, ingame chat is not repeated under every entry in Table 5. In addition there were four cases where the interviewee said that he or she had a face-to-face relationship with one gaming friend belonging to the same multiplayer community. I have chosen not to include these instances in the table because these ties represented close friends or relatives and were not representative of most of the ties the interviewees in question had within the multiplayer communities discussed. It is, however, important to remember that such strong interpersonal ties indeed often exist within the broader network of a multiplayer community.

By putting together the references to various communication media other than ingame chat, it becomes clear that members of multiplayer communities keep in touch with each other by a variety of means of communication. These include both media that enable synchronic, real-time interaction, and those that operate in an asynchronic mode. Furthermore, it is typical for community members to utilize both more intimate, one-on-one means of communication such as telephones and e-mail, and such communication platforms that enable them to reach multiple community members or the whole community at the same time.

TABLE 5 Interviewees' usual means of communication within their communities in order of expressed importance

| **Game setting** | **Size of the community** | **Orientation competitive-casual** | **Usual means of contact excluding in-game chat (in order of relative importance)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| FPS | 20 (10 active) | Competitive | IRC, VoIP, IMS, F2F |
| MMO | 10+ | Casual | VoIP, forum |
| FPS | 20 | Competitive | IRC, VoIP, phone, F2F, email |
| MUD | uncertain | Casual | Email, forum |
| FPS | uncertain | Competitive | F2F, email, WWW |
| FPS | uncertain | Competitive | IRC, VoIP, phone, WWW |
| FPS | 10-20 | Competitive | IRC, VoIP, phone |
| FPS | uncertain | Casual | IRC, F2F |
| Other | 20+ | Casual | |
| MMO | 30+ | Casual | Forum |
| Other | 10-15 | Casual | Forum, WWW, F2F |
| MUD | ~200 | Casual | Occasionally phone |
| Other | 20+ | Casual | Forum, WWW |
| MMO | 30+ | Casual | Forum |
| Other | ~10 | Casual | IRC, IMS, F2F |

The tendency for varied media use can be perceived in both smaller and larger multiplayer communities, whether they have a mainly competitive or mainly casual orientation. This *media multiplexity*, as Haythornthwaite (2005) calls it, is typically related rather to strong than to weak ties.

An interesting, if weak, indication of media multiplexity comes from comparing the dominant orientation of the multiplayer communities with the modes of communication used. While there are exceptions in both directions, it seems that media multiplexity is especially prevalent in those multiplayer communities that have a more competitive orientation. In the data of this study, those communities happened to be organized around the genre of FPS games. Unfortunately, the scope of the data did not lend itself to further analysis of this phenomenon. It remains one of the interesting questions that merits further attention from communication scholars interested in communication in multiplayer communities.

**Meeting off-line**

Off-line meetings with other players are something of a paradox in the multiplayer gaming context. It seems that for every eager spokesperson for face-to-face meetings there is another one who wants to keep his or her privacy and is not interested in contact outside of the online context. In fact, there is some indication that about 40 percent of the players of a typical MMOG are unconditionally interested in meeting their gaming partners in physical reality (Kolo & Baur 2004).

For those often smaller groups and communities that have originated from off-line relationships, continuing the tradition of seeing one another is usually a given even if the community expands beyond its original size. For communities whose origin lies purely in the digital realm, organizing off-line meetings is not necessarily expected. Community members might span several countries and continents, making the sheer task of organizing a meeting between all members practically impossible. In addition, expanding the somewhat specialized multiplayer community relationships outside of their original context might not offer enough promise to warrant the effort. When the social ties within a community fulfill their purpose in their current form, there might be no need to change the status quo.

Typically, meeting other community members face-to-face is at least considered in many multiplayer communities. Among the interviewees there was a general tendency to think that face-to-face meetings could enhance both the community feeling and the task-related capabilities of the community. In many cases, face-to-face meetings were seen as the very epitome of community-ness:

> Interviewee G: We played on the Internet but had some real life meetings as well. That way we had a better idea of who we were and what we could expect from others. Still team spirit was or is most important.
> Interviewer: Were the meetings spent gaming, or did you do something else, too?
> Interviewee G: Meetings were a good chance to play, get drunk or even to go to an amusement park, or even celebrate the bachelor party of one of our guys.
> Interviewer: That sounds good!
> Interviewee G: It became more than game only.

There is some indication that face-to-face meetings play an important role in enhancing the individual members' sense of community, especially in those communities that are born purely in a digital environment (Koh & Kim, 2004). One way of explaining this is to see face-to-face meetings as a way to quickly enhance the inherently low social presence of computer-mediated environments.

Members of multiplayer communities are often well versed in using technologically mediated communication. Still, the possibility of meeting gaming partners face-to-face can be intriguing to many. In the data of this study, a common reason for initiating face-to-face meetings was the notion that such meetings would enable people to get to "truly know" the persons behind the nicknames:

> "I haven't met practically anybody face-to-face in the Diablo-scene or around the Half-Life mods, but in BatMud there were those traditional BatCons, that means that there were meetings every year or half a year. And then I was also in another MUD's meetings, it was a Finnish MUD, Isesus, really nice. Those meetings are really good. And then you see such things in there that for example can't exist within the game. That some people have such a charisma and a possibility to tell wonderful stories just about anything, like about changing a light bulb, or about buying some drinks from the tax-free. They are really enlightening experiences, and in my opinion they do belong to the game in a way."
> (Interviewee A)

As we saw earlier, face-to-face meetings can have a special significance especially for those multiplayer communities that want to play competitively. This can also be seen in the way international competition in these games works, where world championships, for example, are often played in a face-to-face setting.

As a side note, the social network of a multiplayer community sometimes produces relationships that can be described as strong ties. This means that not all strong ties within a multiplayer community network need to be built on prior knowledge of each other, such as is the case when siblings or school friends end up in the same multiplayer community. Rather, an intense, lasting relationship can begin within the context of multiplayer gaming. The interview data included some examples of such cases, even though they were relatively rare. Communication in such relationships was typically not confined to the realm of multiplayer games alone. Instead, other modes of communication, such as telephone or face-to-face meetings, were utilized. The idea that the

creation and maintenance of strong ties would benefit from communication outside the game's boundaries was also prominent:

> "Well, I have to say that I still have such a rock-hard viewpoint about it, that if you want to develop a friendship or such, it can't ever reach quite the same level if you have never seen face-to-face, met even once, or had a talk. That changes awfully much. It is interesting how you create images of people even if you have never seen their picture. You really do form such an image, and it can be even radically different (laughs) than the reality."
> (Interviewee J)

As we have seen, multiplayer games offer a rich and multimodal communication environment. Even without the connection to other forms of technologically mediated communication and face-to-face communication possibilities, multiplayer games can include an astonishing variety of interaction forms (see also Manninen, 2003). On the other hand, it is clear that there are limitations to the communication possibilities within multiplayer games, and that players try to overcome these limitations by communicating outside the game system and by inventing imaginative ways of reaching each other within the game (Manninen & Kujanpää, 2005).

While multiplayer communities can be seen as a part of the larger category of virtual communities, they have significant dynamics of their own, too. In particular, the whole context of social interaction in multiplayer games requires special attention. Online multiplayer computer games are typically complex systems that allow a multitude of ways for players to interact with the game, as well as with each other. Even though they might share characteristics with other information and communication technologies, they should not be mistaken for simply enhanced chats. The games' dynamics contribute to how roles, rituals, rules, and routines in multiplayer communities evolve.

## 4.2 Sociability as a motivator for multiplayer gaming

There may be many reasons why a person would be interested in online multiplayer gaming rather than playing alone. Within the data of this study, for example, such reasons included spending their free time, having fun, escapism, competitiveness, challenge when learning something new, and dependency on the relationships within the hobby's sphere, among others. These reasons were very similar to those that people typically give when inquiring about their reasons for practicing other hobbies (i.e. dancing, playing a musical instrument in a band etc.). The possibility of finding more challenging opponents than a computer could offer and the added depth and variety that can result from the inclusion of multiple players were major generic motivators behind playing multiplayer games:

> "[…] when I finish it (a single player game) I'm going to put it on the shelf and that's it. But when it's multiplayer, you can finish the single player campaign, then you can actually play with people. So as long as you like you are going to play with it."
> (Interviewee F)

From the viewpoint of this study, an especially relevant factor that explains people's motivation for playing multiplayer games is the social dimension of such games. Usually sociability is not the only factor that helps explain a particular person's choice of games. Still it can be that sociability is a major factor for some multiplayer gamers:

> "Well, it does give social contacts. For example when talking about this [name of the community] that is a small community, I didn't know all the people in it before. But now I do. And so, in addition to social contacts it provides a nice way of spending time together, and also in some way there's satisfaction in being able to work for the benefit of one's own community. For example, when we made those t-shirts, came up with the idea and so forth, and, it creates such a feeling of togetherness that is always positive in such communities. Just like with belonging to any group, of course it's the social side that's most important."
> (Interviewee M)

When studying communication in multiplayer communities, it is especially relevant to inquire into the motives of those players that engage in multiplayer gaming from a deliberately social perspective. After all, even though multiplayer games by definition require multiple players to function, it is not equally imperative that interaction between those players be of a social nature or that they should always lead to the emergence of long-term social networks. The important questions are, then, what can long-term social ties within a game or a gaming community mean to a player, and what draws people to participate in those groups and communities that evolve around gaming experiences?

As we have seen, online multiplayer computer games come in many forms, ranging from text-based MUDs to the graphically depicted virtual worlds of MMOGs. Their operation is based on multiple human players interacting with one another and the game world, and they have been proven to be a fertile ground for social interaction. Indeed, sociability seems to be a major motivational factor behind the participation of many players (see e.g. Schiano & White 1998; Griffiths, Davies & Chappel, 2003; Yee, 2006c).

The question of gaming and sociability can be seen as a two-way street. On the one hand, sociability can often be seen as an integral part of the gaming experience. That is, games might benefit from the social activities between gamers. On the other hand, gaming brings content and meaning to interaction between players. In this way games and gaming contribute to a larger social reality.

Sociability can be a significant motivator of gaming, even though not all people perceive it to be equally important. Generally, one would expect players of multiplayer games to be aware of the nature of the multiplayer gaming

already when deciding to start to play such a game. The presence of other players should then be not only acceptable, but also desirable.

Generally speaking, most players of multiplayer games belong to gaming groups and communities at some point in their gaming career. Evidence of this is provided by Kolo and Baur (2004), whose survey among German players of the MMOG *Ultima Online* showed that 88 percent of players logged in to the game not only to play but to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances, and that as many as 84 percent of them belonged to some sort of organized group or community. All in all, two thirds of their sample stated that the possibility to be in contact with thousands of other players was one of the motivating factors when playing a game such as Ultima Online (Kolo & Baur, 2004).

The importance of sociability as a motivator is even more evident in those cases where gamers stop playing a multiplayer game but maintain their social ties within it by still logging on. Some people are even known to use the game as a chat-application in order to stay in touch with their friends (Schiano & White 1998). While this kind of behavior is possible in some games, such as MUDs, because of their partly asynchronous nature, it is practically nonexistent in some other kind of games. For example, in a high-tempo first-person shooter game (FPS), such as the various *Half Life* variants, the hectic nature of the game discourages players from using it as a chat alone. In these cases, players might still stay in contact with their gaming friends after they stop playing themselves, but most of the interaction is likely to take place outside the actual game, such as in Internet relay chat (IRC), or message board operating in the World Wide Web.

One of the first analytical models that explained the various motives of multiplayer game players was offered by Richard Bartle (1996). One of the pioneers of MUD-development, Bartle constructed a model where the player base of any single MUD could be analyzed by dividing it into four categories. He labeled these categories *killers*, *achievers*, *socializers*, and *explorers*. Without delving too deeply into Bartle's model, it can be said that for the existence of a multiplayer community in general, socializing offers two interesting points. First, a community cannot exist without socializers. Second, if all the members of a community are socializers, they do not actually need a game in order to be in contact with one another.

In conclusion, the importance of the social and communication aspects should not be underestimated when trying to understand why and how people engage in activities in multiplayer games and game-like virtual worlds. The motives behind social activity in multiplayer games are as varied as those guiding human behavior in other contexts as well. In the words of Heather Bromberg (1996: 146), "*For many, MUDs and chat networks are 'just a game' or 'just another form of communication'; for others, they offer an antidote to loneliness and malaise, allow the exploration of alternate identities and personae, offer the promise of connectivity and community and allow users to experience the feeling of mastery over their environments.*"

# 5 COMMUNITY IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

In the previous chapters we have considered the potential of multiplayer games as a platform for complex social interaction. In this chapter, we focus on the networks of people that operate within and around multiplayer games as they form social aggregates+ that could be described as *communities*.

The inclusion of the term community in the discourse of CMC-enabled social networks holds both promise and problems. When observing the everyday interactions of online multiplayer gamers it is evident that they communicate extensively with each other. Much of this communication has to do with exchanging information, ideas, and opinions, and forming friendships and networks. Still, not every group or association of players can or should be described as a community. Often gamers join together for a short period of time in order to be better able to achieve a certain goal. To say that this kind of interaction proves the presence of multiplayer communities might be far-fetched (see e.g. Jones, 1999b: 237; Hand & Moore, 2006: 167). While a community cannot exist without some communication, the presence of communication alone does not guarantee that there is community there. On a similar note, commonality and similarity alone do not necessarily lead to the emergence of community even though a holding-in-common of ideas, values, beliefs, or qualities is undoubtedly at the heart of community as a concept.

There is no simple recipe for determining what a community is. For the purposes of this study it is relevant to find out what is generally meant by the concept of community and explore how our understanding of the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities will benefit from those definitions.

Chapter five starts with a discussion of the concept of community from a historical perspective. Towards the end of section 5.1 the concept of communities as social networks is applied to the framework of the present study. Section 5.2 moves the discussion towards those relevant societal and technological changes that help us alter our perspective from a historical to a contemporary one.

## 5.1 Community as a concept

### 5.1.1 The controversial history of community

So far as we know, mankind has always organized itself into groups and networks of various sizes. Often, those networks have been referred to as *communities*. Still, to say precisely what a community *is* has proven to be problematic, not least since the term has been used to describe social aggregations ranging in size from a few people to whole nations (Lehtonen, 1990: 15).

The history of the term community is a lengthy one. In Europe alone there have been attempts to define communities for over 2000 years (Lehtonen, 1990: 9). The turning point of contemporary scientific discourse on communities is closer to our own time, though. This turning point is located somewhere between the middle and end of the 19th century, and it is often embodied in the dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* by Ferdinand Tönnies ([1887] 1957).

Tönnies' main thesis was that a new form of human social organization, Gesellschaft, was then arising alongside the more traditional forms of communities, which he called Gemeinschaft. According to Tönnies, Gesellschaft, which has been translated as both association and society, was a less personal and in many ways a colder form of community than Gemeinschaft had been. Tönnies' theory was that when human relations moved towards Gesellschaft, it would lead to less and weaker cohesion between people.

In many ways Tönnies' dichotomy relates to a juxtaposition of countryside versus the city, of rural versus urban. This juxtaposition was a popular one at the time of Tönnies' writings, when the western world was wrestling with the pressures of industrialization and related changes. One could say that at the time there was a certain demand for nostalgic thoughts like the Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft dichotomy, where novel forms of communality were seen as less appealing or less human than previous forms of social organization. (Bell & Newby, 1971; 1974; Lehtonen, 1990.)

Another influential and often cited writer and sociological researcher of Tönnies' time was Emile Durkheim ([1897] 1951). Durkheim suggested that there were forces of molecular development and dysfunctional communication at work in society. His thesis was that western society would drift into a state where the existing norms that governed the behavior of individuals and groups would get weaker. This state of society he called *anomie*. According to Durkheim, this trend in society meant a move away from what he called mechanical solidarity towards organic solidarity. This was possible because of the increase of individual freedom and of the value of the individual.

The major difference with Tönnies and Durkheim was that according to Durkheim, society was not necessarily becoming less communal, but the forms of communal social life were changing. Tönnies, on the other hand, approached the change in society from a more evaluative position, where new forms of community were clearly inferior to traditional Gemeinschaft-types of

communities. This firm inclusion of values in his theory has been said to lower the value of Tönnies' thinking (Elias, 1974: xii-xiii).

The critique aimed at Tönnies, and Durkheim as well, has been similar to the critique given to later theorists of community studies. According to the critique, most definitions of community have been saturated with emotional and value-bound implications. In addition, because of its wide scope, the term community seems to have little empirical value by itself. (Bell & Newby, 1971; 1974; Elias, 1974; Brint, 2001.)

Since Tönnies' and Durkheim's time, various academic disciplines have produced hundreds of definitions of community. This is partly due to a lack of general consensus, which has led to community being defined anew almost every time it has been used, and partly due to the changes in our society, which have prompted scholars to look at the subject through new eyes (Elias, 1974).

Despite the range of definitions of community, there are some qualities that come up consistently enough to give us an idea of what is usually meant by the word. In his classic study from 1955, George Hillery analyzed about one hundred definitions of community (Hillery, 1955, according to Bell & Newby, 1971: 27–29). According to Hillery's analysis, there were four main factors that emerged from the definitions. These were 1) geographical proximity, 2) feelings of belonging, 3) phenomena of symbolic communality, and 4) long-term social interaction between the members of the community. While dated, the gist of Hillery's analysis is still valid today. Similar analyses have also been conducted later on, with the main difference being the exclusion of references to geographical proximity in many newer definitions.

The kind of descriptive definitions of communities that are abundant in academic discourse are typically broad and generalized, with various clauses expanding and specifying them to be used in specific contexts. For example, Brint (2001: 8) offers a general definition that is based on a synthesis of the 20th century community studies. According to this definition, communities are, "[…] *aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern.*" Similar definitions have also been provided specifically for the context of computer-mediated communication, such as Wellman's (2001) definition of communities as, "[…] *networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity.*" Both definitions stress the emotional aspects of belonging to a community, but allow for a rational interest as well. This is important when looking at social aggregates in multiplayer games, where certain motivations for belonging to a community, such as becoming a better player and beating the game or other players, can be seen as having a rational ingredient to them. General, descriptive definitions that embrace the whole scope of community are typically too broad to be useful analytical tools by themselves when looking at a specific context such as multiplayer games. Rather, in order to understand what community can mean in this specific context, we have to look at the building blocks behind the general definitions in greater detail.

When applying general knowledge of communities in the analysis of those social aggregates that operate within multiplayer games, there are three overarching approaches that seem especially relevant. First, a community should include at least some level of social interaction between a variety of communicators. The relevant factor here is that of social relationships between members of the community. It is generally accepted that relationships within communities are long-term rather than fleeting, and that they can be both demanding and intimate. These sustained relationships between community members form the basis on which social identity is built, that is, the community members' reciprocal conceptions of themselves and each other (Jenkins, 1996). Second, members of communities typically experience feelings of similarity and communality at least on some basic level. To be able to share something significant with other members of the community, be it a concerted action, a moral order, a belief system or any other similar concept, is important for any community. Third, a community process revolves around a shared symbolic reality. The existence of community necessarily means some kind of inside-outside split, where the ones on the inside take part in ritualistic communication events and have an insiders' knowledge of the rules, norms, and other factors that structure the social interaction taking place within the community. Furthermore, this kind of communication usually takes place within an identifiable place, a common public space of sorts. (For a thorough review of relevant factors for traditional community studies, see e.g. Brint, 2001. See also Jones, 1997b for a viewpoint on the requirements of CMC community emerging.)

In addition to these overarching factors of long-term relationships, a feeling of community, and a shared symbolic reality, there are some relevant structural aspects that help us understand community in a multiplayer gaming context. These include the voluntariness of multiplayer communities and their emphasis on shared activities as a primary reason for interaction.

In general, communities can be seen as differing basically according to whether their existence is founded mainly on geographical proximity or choice. Even though there are multiplayer communities that do operate in close proximity, the main factor behind any given multiplayer community is choice. People choose to play multiplayer computer games, and they choose to form social ties with other players; they are not forced to do so. They choose to do so because they share at least some interests, at the minimum an interest in multiplayer gaming. It is these interests that form the basis for multiplayer communities, making them essentially *communities of interest*.

Within communities that are based mainly on choice, different primary reasons can be seen for interaction between the members of the community. These reasons can be labeled either action or belief-based. There are social networks that operate within and around multiplayer computer games yet have relatively little or nothing to do with actual playing (e.g. Schiano & White, 1998). Overall, though, *playing* the game or games together can be seen as the primary reason for interaction between members of a multiplayer community.

As Hand and Moore (2006: 170) point out, "*In thinking about digital gaming in terms of community formation and maintenance we are looking at gaming as a form of* collective activity*: an activity that involves interaction between individuals, the effect of which is to produce the experience of belonging to a community of one sort or another.*" Adopting this position leads us to see multiplayer communities primarily as *communities of action*. This separates multiplayer communities from those communities that do not include such a high level of activities, such as communities based on shared beliefs. Furthermore, the emphasis on joint activities excludes so-called *imagined communities* (Beniger, 1986) from the focus of this study. In imagined communities, people identify with a community and have a feeling of community on a purely cognitive level, without any actual joint participation.

As our intermediate stopping point, we should see multiplayer communities as something more than just collectivities of individuals who have something as vague as an interest in gaming in common. These individuals need some sense of "belonging" in the community, which makes community very much a mental and cognitive process. On the other hand, the kinds of multiplayer communities that this study is interested in also require something more than just a perception of similarity among a group of individuals resulting in group identification or imagined community. Rather, a multiplayer community is a process that entails both these levels, the external and the internal. From such a viewpoint the existence of a community has to be confirmed by its members, but membership should also result in observable changes in those individuals' behavior. Without observable changes, the phenomenon is situated outside the interest of studies into social interaction in multiplayer communities.

In addition to the ideas about communities presented above, there is one central viewpoint utilized in this study that helps us to understand community in a multiplayer gaming context. That viewpoint is of communities as social networks, and it is discussed in the next sub-section.

### 5.1.2 Communities as social networks

There are several approaches one can take when studying communities. These include seeing communities as organizations, ecologies, microcosmoses, or social networks, among others. (For a review of categorizing community research, see e.g. Bell & Newby, 1974.) Of these, the concept of communities as social networks is especially typical of studies into communication within communities. Social networks come in many shapes and sizes, from small groups to larger, expansive social networks. Taking the idea of a network, the individual members of a community, and especially the ties that bind them together, become important. That these ties are formed and kept up through communication is clear. A community network can live and thrive only if some communication flows between its members.

This sub-section discusses those basic ideas of social networks that are relevant for the present study. While I am drawing from the literature on social networks in order to better understand the dynamics of social interaction within multiplayer communities, I am not utilizing social network analysis, an approach stemming from the thoughts of John Barnes (1954). Social network analysis is especially useful when studying questions like which of the members of an organization are more connected or central, or what kind of a personal network an individual has around him or her, for example (Wellman, 1997; 1999). Instead of utilizing social network analysis, I use the concept of social networks as an illustrative metaphor.

Effectively, the standpoint adopted in this study is somewhere between a classic approach to community studies and the approach usually taken in social network analysis. This study is mainly interested in how multiplayer communities function through social interaction, evident in topics such as negotiating values and goals and the usa of power and control. On the other hand, this study is not focused upon a certain structure a community might have, but rather it embraces the ideas of a continuous flux of members and a constant negotiation regarding membership that are typical for social networks operating in a CMC-environment. Therefore, questions regarding boundaries are kept open, and it is the webs and patterns of interactions and relationships that become the focus of the research. (See e.g. Wellman, 1997: 180–181.)

The social network metaphor recognizes varying levels of exchanges supporting those social processes that constitute a community. Social interaction between people is seen as relations, and it is these relations that form the basis of ties between people. Such person-to-person connectivity then results in social networks. The ties within these networks are usually described as being *weak* or *strong* according to multiple factors such as frequency of contact, intimacy, and duration of the relationship, among others. Stronger ties are those where participants communicate more frequently about a wide range of different topics and using several different modes of communication (multimodality). (Haythornthwaite, 2005.)

The relationship between strong and weak ties should not be seen as evaluatively as their names might suggest, as they both serve important functions. The *strength of weak ties* as presented by Granovetter (1973) describes how weak ties such as acquaintances are more likely than strong ties such as family and close friends to connect us to a wider range of social networks, allowing us to gain access to new information, resources, and contacts. Furthermore, it is in the nature of community ties that they are not necessarily kept up actively all the time, nor do they necessarily include elements of devotion, loyalty, shared values, or personal caring (Brint, 2001: 8–9).

Online communities can offer the opportunity for weak ties to develop into strong ones (see e.g. Baym, 2000). Such development of ties does not necessarily mean that they develop towards a face-to-face connection. Instead it means that pairs add to their repertoire of modes of connection; adding private e-mail to public discussion, calling each other on the phone, even meeting if

feasible. This kind of development in the ties should be seen as going from public to private. (Haythornthwaite, 2005.)

Basically, a social network such as a multiplayer community consists of ties between people. It is possible for both weak and strong ties to be evident in multiplayer communities. Indeed, there is no hard and fast rule as to how strong the ties within multiplayer communities should be in order for symbolic communality and social identity to emerge, for example. Still, the concept of community that this study subscribes to expects *some* kinds of ties to exist between the members of a community. It is the existence of these ties that separates multiplayer communities from larger aggregates of people such as the players' societies surrounding multiplayer games, some of which run into millions.

A social network viewpoint recognizes that a community is not a stable entity. Rather, it sees it as a process through which a group of people strive to organize their lives according to some shared idea. Through this process, people construct a sense of togetherness and belonging. (Cohen, 1989.) This process is not necessarily connected to its possible end result. That is, the observation that people seem to be building a community does not necessarily mean that there is community there (Lehtonen, 1990: 25–26). Furthermore, what a process viewpoint reminds us is that every community has a history, for example in the form of a smaller group of people around whom the community has grown. For example, a certain norm within a community might not be understandable without knowledge of the earlier circumstances that led to its development. On the other hand, being a continuous process also means that whatever form a community's interactions take at a given point in time, they are bound to change later on.

A process viewpoint further introduces us to the concept of permeable borders. When seeing a community as a process, it is clear that its boundaries are not set in stone and thus are difficult to define clearly. A social network viewpoint is thus decidedly fluid, something that can be seen as being especially beneficial for studies interested in communication within communities (see e.g. Smith, 1993). The idea that communities are systems with permeable borders reminds us that communities are usually not tightly bound, densely knit groups. Rather, the past thirty years of network analysis has shown that communities are far-flung social networks where the ties between members are loosely bound, sparsely knit, and often specialized. There surely do exist village-like neighborhoods where social ties are densely knit, but they represent only one form of community. (Wellman, 1999.)

Here, the distinction between the words *group* and *community* deserves further clarification. It might well be that much like the linguistic distinction between the words group and network is well established in everyday discourse (Wellman, 1997: 179), the distinction between group and community is equally clear. On the other hand, both groups and communities are essentially social networks, making it problematic sometimes to neatly separate the two. One way to try to clarify the distinction is to use size as a deciding

factor. While there are no clear rules as to the size differences between groups and communities, the word community is usually used to refer to larger social networks than the word group. Traditionally, groups have been seen as relatively tight social networks where practically all the members are somehow bound to each other, not through other people but directly with each other**.** In a community, by contrast, the ties are often seen to be looser, with only some of the members of the network having a straight connection with one another. By analogy, the relations that form a community could be seen as forming a widely spread spider's web, whereas a group's relations could be seen as curling into a tight ball (Wellman, 1997: 179–180). What this leads to, though, is that while a distinction can be seen between groups and communities based on their size, it is not a dichotomical one. Rather, groups and communities can be seen as standing on a continuum where a community process can be group-like or community-like according to factors such as the density of the social network or the multiplexity of its activities. For example, a group can later on become a community, and a community can contain groups of people within its general structure. In many ways, then, it would be wise to speak of multiplayer groups and communities instead of one or the other. Within the limits of this work I have chosen to use the term multiplayer communities as a sort of umbrella term in order not to have to repeat the "groups and communities" part every time I refer to these community-like social networks that operate within a multiplayer gaming context. I do, however, recognize that this is an imperfect solution at best.

In conclusion, a social network viewpoint emphasizes the significance of communication between community members, and appreciates both the processual and system-like nature of communities. To see community as a process reminds us that social networks are constantly evolving instead of being stabile, unchanging entities. In other words, a social network's size, shape, and other characteristics depend on when and from what angle one approaches them. A systemic view reminds us that a social network is always somehow connected to other systems, that its borders have to be considered to be permeable, and that it thus cannot be fully understood in isolation from its surroundings.

## 5.2 The rise of new forms of community

This section aims to link the traditional view of community with the concept of online multiplayer communities that will be discussed throughout chapter six. This linking is done by analyzing some of the changes that have taken place in industrial economies during the last few decades, as well as taking current developments in communication technology into consideration. Special attention is given to the concept of the *network society* and to the dispute concerning "virtual" communities and their effects on our society in general.

### 5.2.1 The network society

Historically, mankind as we know it has probably always striven to expand its communication networks and the ways in which it can be in touch with other people. From smoke signals to flag towers to modern telecommunications, mediated communication has been constantly under development. From a contemporary point of view, those changes in society and our communication environment that have taken place since the introduction of industrialization seem especially relevant in our daily lives. Furthermore, the development and popularization of digital communication devices seems to have contributed to some major changes in our social surroundings. In the next paragraphs we look at these changes from the viewpoint of communities.

Talk about online communities - social aggregates that are based on communication occurring in the digital realm of computer networks - is not the first reference to a move of communal sociability away from constrictions posed by geographical proximity. Early on in the 20th century, with the increase in people's mobility, a discussion arose of whether there might be other factors that would warrant the use of the word community than simply living in the same place (see e.g. Elias, 1974).

When computer-mediated communication was still taking its first steps, some early observers were predicting that the importance of traditional, localized communities would diminish over time. Examples of such thinkers were Melvin Webber (1963) and Anthony Richmond (1969). Webber claimed that in a society where the possibilities for social interaction were expanding rapidly, the major factor that would dictate communal life was that of individual choice (Webber, 1963 according to Bell & Newby, 1971). Richmond presented similar thoughts, claiming that the major fluctuations in industrial societies would lead from tightly-bound communities (comparable to Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*), to more general societies (comparable to the *Gesellschaft*), to an even more specialized and open form of social connection, that of social networks. Alongside this general development Richmond saw many parallel forces. These included a move from a class-society towards a meritocracy, an increase in the freedom and extent to which people would mobilize themselves, and a transition from oral and written communication towards electronically mediated communication. (Richmond, 1969.)

In sociological circles of the 1960s and 1970s, thoughts such as Webber's and Richmond's were often characterized as naïve and exaggerated (Bell & Newby, 1971: 18). From a contemporary perspective, such ideas concerning a more versatile and free communication environment and the impact of communication technologies have apparent value. They help us to understand the basic premises of what has been called the *network society*.

As a concept, the network society describes a societal transition from a group-based society to broader and looser social networks. In a network society people move about and communicate freely, aided by the possibilities presented by technologically mediated communication, connecting with many

more people in their lifetimes than has been possible in societies more bound by geographical limitations (see e.g. Castells, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Wellman, 2001). This emphasis on movement and connectivity can be seen as antithetical to traditional ideals of communality where strong, long-lasting ties based on geographical proximity governed social organization. As Gergen (2000: 203-204) has argued, the general increase in the amount of human relations we have and its (automatic) effect, the decline in the amount of time available for each individual relationship, has led to a dissipation of our strong ties and a crisis in geographically oriented communality. In the words of Wellman (2001), this transition has been from *door to door* communality, where geographical proximity mattered, towards a *role to role* communality, where people can belong to several communities in a variety of roles according to their own interests.

It is not only the movement of individuals and the amount of possible ties that characterize a network society. The general idea of movement and flexibility run through the whole concept of the network society. For example, in a network society individuals are more free to move through social space. This means, "[…] *a mobility of status, class, social role, and character*" (Jones, 1999b: 225). In a network society the various boundaries between interpersonal relationships, groups, and communities are more permeable, the ways of engaging in social interaction are more multifaceted, and people's connections to their social networks are more varied and overlapping than before (people belong to multiple communities simultaneously). Even hierarchies can be seen as being lower and more easily renewed. (Wellman, 2001.)

Communication technology is an integral part of the concept of a network society. From cars to planes to phones, the technological solutions available to us affect our possibilities for expanding our social networks beyond geographical limitations. Typically, computer-mediated communication such as e-mail, chat, and message boards are seen as being especially suitable for supporting broad and loose social networks. One central reason for this is the extent to which such applications of CMC allow us to belong to multiple networks simultaneously, and through them we can relatively easily alter the extent of our participation and involvement between our networks. (Wellman, 1997: 186-187.)

### 5.2.2 The dispute over virtual community

Even though some forms of community-like social organizations had existed in computer networks practically since the introduction of CMC (see chapter one), it was not until the early 1990s that the academic world started to be interested in them en masse. While several terms were used to describe and define this broad new phenomenon, it was the term *virtual community* that struck a chord among the main parties to the public discourse, mainly academics, politicians, and the popular media.

The term virtual community became general in the early 1990s with the help of books such as Howard Rheingold's (1993) "The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier". In what became perhaps the most cited definition of virtual communities of all time, Rheingold portrays them as, "[…] *social aggregations that emerge from the NET when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace*" (Rheingold, 1993: 5). The intuitively appealing term gained popularity as a label for all kinds of CMC-based social aggregates. After all, almost everyone had an idea of what a *community* was, and the concept of virtual in its electronic sense was being pushed at the same time by *virtual reality* and other such terms.

Unfortunately, many of the same reasons that made the term virtual community intuitively appealing also made it problematic as a tool for academic discourse. Labeling something as a community meant subjecting the analysis to the historical, and often controversial, burden of community research. This was unfortunate in at least two ways. First, the use of an established term to describe a new and emergent phenomenon led many researchers to look for forms of social organization that somehow fitted a pre-established image of what a community should be like. Second, after it became clear that the traditional concept of community could only poorly be used to describe the multiform CMC-based social aggregates, the obvious conclusion was that there was no community there.

Besides the problematic nature of the word community, the other half of the term virtual community had its own set of problems. The word *virtual* has many interesting epistemological roots, such as the ones leading to "virtue" (see e.g. Wilbur 2000, 47–48). More commonly, though, it is used to describe something "*relating to a computer technique by which a person, wearing a headset or mask, has the experience of being in an environment created by the computer, and of interacting with and causing changes in it*" (Collins English Dictionary, 2000). This, in addition to the connotation of "virtual" being dichotomous to "real", led many to the conclusion that virtual communities were intangible mock-ups of physical communities, perhaps trying to imitate them yet failing to have similar dynamics to their physical world models. In this light, much of the discourse surrounding the "virtual" with regard to online communities has actually done a disservice to our understanding of the phenomenon.

What has made much of this otherwise fruitful discourse aimless is its dichotomical nature, which was especially visible at the turn of the 1990s. Where one party saw virtual communities as heralds of a new era and saviors of the free individual, the other party saw them as a sacrificial shrine upon which the last remains of humanity and the good old life would be lost forever. With hindsight one can see that neither of these positions was exclusively right. While CMC certainly has come to be a major part of our social lives, its existence has not substantially altered the fundamental social ties between people. If one wants to identify the effect caused by the introduction of communication technologies, according to the majority of studies it should be a neutral or even a positive one. (See e.g. Castells, 2001: 119–121.)

As Hand and Moore (2006: 173) point out, the critics of "virtual community" claim that community has been stripped of its ethical dimensions. The argument goes that since virtual communities are based on mutual interest rather than mutual obligation or proximity, they are in effect something else than communities. However, I am inclined to follow the thoughts of Miller and Slater (2000: 4–8), when they state that virtuality, as a term, has more to do with postmodern academic rhetoric than the actual reality of the contemporary Internet. The actual people who form the social networks that operate in the Internet are indeed less concerned with their communities being virtual than the multitude of researchers looking down at them from academia or from a political, religious, or journalistic standpoint for that matter. I would not toss the term out of the proverbial window quite so easily. Labeling something as virtual could, and should, still have its place when looking at certain areas of computer-mediated communication. For example, within the context of multiplayer games the term virtual has its uses. Since many of the most popular multiplayer games are essentially complex three-dimensional spaces, naming them virtual such as in *virtual environments* has actually more to offer than when discussing a standard chat room or a similar text-based facet of CMC. However, for consistency's sake I use the term online community throughout this study when referring to communities operating largely or wholly in computer networks.

It is no wonder that the often intangible nature of online communities leaves many of us baffled. As Steven Jones (1997a: 17) puts it, "*We think, and sometimes feel, we belong to Internet communities, but we are not sure quite how or in what ways, or whether belonging* matters." In so many ways, belonging to an online community requires a fair amount of belief and imagination – and since they are ultimately a matter of personal experience, it is often difficult for an outsider to determine the existence of online community. Indeed, one could say that the whole idea of community and connectivity taking place in a virtual world requires at least a slight suspension of disbelief (Bromberg, 1996).

**The fear of life on the screen**

All major developments in technologically mediated communication have encountered their share of criticism and fear, and online communities are no exception to this rule. The fears expressed by many critics about the idea of online community echo the sentiments of those who see CMC in general as a negative development. Many of these fears culminate in the idea that technologically mediated communication, and especially life online, will somehow alienate people from what is considered "real life". There are at least three major fears that surface every now and again in various discourses surrounding online communities. These fears are the fear of losing communality and its replacement by individualism and autonomy, the fear of tribalization, and the fear of loneliness in the virtual world or cyberspace. Over the next paragraphs these fears are discussed in turn.

The fear of losing communality and its replacement by individualism becomes understandable in view of the fact that in many cultures around the world, communities have traditionally been seen as mainly positive. This is illustrated especially clearly in everyday discourse as well as political and religious rhetorics, where the word community practically always carries positive connotations. Scientific discourse has also often been just as prejudiced in favor of communities and communality (see e.g. Elias, 1974; Lehtonen, 1990: 32; Saastamoinen, 2001, 166). There are contradictory voices, though, reminding us that at their worst, communities can for example attempt to moralize and eradicate variations in values whenever the variations are considered dangerous to the ruling world-view (Saastamoinen, 2001). Indeed, throughout our history there are not as many examples of the emancipatory nature of traditional, tight communities as there are examples of their adverse effects (Lehtonen 1990, 10).

As Wellman and Gulia provokingly stated already in 1999 in their overview of the question of virtual community, "*Pundits worry that virtual community may not truly be community. These worries are confusing the pastoralist myth of community for the reality. Community ties are already geographically dispersed, sparsely knit, connected heavily by telecommunications (phone and fax), and specialized in context*" (p. 355). The worry for many is that when operating in a CMC context, we are not tied to one or a few communities, but rather can customize our social contacts. In a way, we can build our communal experience from fragments. (Jones, 1999b: 224.) It is exactly this customizability and freedom of choice that appears suspicious from a traditional viewpoint, which appreciates communities as tightly bound and densely knit groups.

Interestingly enough, there seems to be a disparity between the values of social cohesion and of equality, both of which are important to the Western world-view. This disparity stems from the idea that the aspects of community process that enhance cohesion and are connected to face-to-face communication and the possibilities for social control are incompatible with the ideal of equality, something that seems to be possible only in communities where aspects enhancing cohesion are weak (Brint, 2001: 20).

In addition to the concept of the network society, a common thread in the discourse of contemporary social aggregations is that of *tribes* and *tribalization* (see e.g. Maffesoli, 1996). Put simply, speaking of tribes emphasizes those collective social forces that work alongside and against the general individualistic tendencies of our society. To belong to a tribe means belonging to a social collective in a more thorough way than just being a member of a community means. Some people even go so far as to claim that this tribalization is a process of de-individualization, and that speaking of individuals is not as descriptive of our time as it is to speak of our various roles within our tribes (Maffesoli, 1996: 6–11).

Online communities can be seen as a culmination of the development that has led communities away from factors such as geographical proximity and towards choice (Castells, 2001). Furthermore, the emphasis on choice has led to worries of online communities being inward bound and hostile towards

outsiders. In such a light, tribalization can be seen as a problem, if not for communities themselves, then for the broader society around them. There is a fear that despite the possibly positive effects of communities, tribalization leads to a state where relationships between different communities remain distant or even polarize into hostility. A division into exclusive sub-cultures promoting a distinct separation between insiders and outsiders is feared to have potential to encourage intolerance and undemocratic development. (Saastamoinen, 2001: 180.)

The third big fear apparent in the discourse surrounding online communities is the fear of loneliness. Both media scholars and the popular media have voiced concerns about the possible negative effects that the ever-growing presence of traditional and "new" media have on our lives. For example, a typical concern is that our face-to-face relations will suffer from the time spent online. From time to time there steps the ghost of an isolated individual into this discourse. The basic idea behind the isolated individual is that while technologically mediated communication might give shy or withdrawn people more chances to reach out and connect to others, there is a danger that the choice to connect to virtual environments further isolates these individuals from their immediate physical environments (see e.g. Bromberg, 1996: 147). Another prevalent view is the "Bowling alone" hypothesis of Putnam (2000), which states that the general flow of a modern, technology-laden world is leading people away from gathering around street corners, cafeterias, and other traditional public places. Thus the time spent with the media, which Putnam sees as relatively passive and disengaging, leads to a decline in civic and social activity.

From the viewpoint of social relations, evidence surrounding the question of loneliness is mixed. On the one hand there is evidence that significant changes can occur in an individual's social life when Internet use exceeds 5 hours a week (Nie & Erbring, 2002). In effect, it might be necessary to displace various other activities in order to be able to accommodate the hours spent online. This, in turn, has been feared to lead to a decrease in communication with face-to-face contact groups, such as family, and increase loneliness (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay & Sherlis, 1998). On the other hand, it also seems that Internet use does not decrease the size of users' social networks or the time they spend with friends (Franzen, 2000). There is also some indication that the younger generation of Internet users seems to use it more readily for social ends than older users (Luukka, Hujanen, Lokka, Modinos, Pietikäinen & Suoninen, 2001). This could be seen as a positive indicator concerning the future of computer-mediated social networks

As an after-word to the dispute of virtuality and the fear of life on the screen, I want to present Wellman's (1999) thoughts on the "lost community". As Wellman vividly points out in his overview of the debate about community, community has never been lost. Even though there have been multiple voices spelling out doom for community-like social aggregations since the industrial revolution, or indeed since the beginning of our written history, researchers have found communities thriving wherever they have looked. When digesting

this statement, one has to understand that it does not imply that the types of communities found have always been the same. Rather, there are indications that new forms of community have often replaced older ones. For example, instead of neighborhoods, people might be connected to each other through dispersed networks that still succeed in being both supportive and sociable.

## 5.3 Conclusions

This chapter has led us through various ideas about communities and how the concept of community has evolved along with changes in society and the development of technologically mediated communication. As we have seen, many of the difficulties related to defining community within traditional community studies have carried over into studies of *virtual* or *cybercommunities* as well (e.g. Jones, 1997b; Watson, 1997). Still, the word community is not without its uses. One cannot replace it by simply putting in another word like group, organization, team, network, clan, or guild. Many of these have fairly well established meanings themselves, which could guide the scope of observation to other kinds of questions than the concept of community. In addition, all of these terms face the same problem as the word community: it is simply not possible to expect any one term to unproblematically encompass the kind of variety existing within a broad phenomenon such as community in multiplayer games. It is the unique connotations of the term community that, for better or worse, make it useful.

While there is no clear consensus on what a community is, there are certain qualities that are associated almost universally with communities. First of all, communities are based on continuous social interaction between their members. Secondly, they provide their members various boons, such as sociability, support, feelings of belonging, information, and a means to build social identity. Thirdly, communication within a community is at least partly based on a shared symbolic reality, which makes it possible for symbolic communality to develop. To reach such communality requires time, emphasizing the processual nature of communities. (See e.g. Bell & Newby, 1971; Brint, 2001; Wellman, 2001.)

The significance of social interaction between community members is further clarified by the concept of social networks. From a social network perspective a community cannot exist without a network of ties between its members. Not all the members of the community need to have a so called strong tie with one another. Sometimes the ties between community members are strong, sometimes weak, and sometimes there exists simply the potential for such a tie because of belonging to the same community. Nevertheless, from this viewpoint all members need to be *connected* to the social network that forms the basic structure of the community. If a person has no contact whatsoever with other members of a community, he or she does not belong to it. This point rules

out certain forms of imagined communities (Beniger, 1986) and emphasizes those communities that are relatively small in size. On the other hand, this does not dictate a clearly defined border for the membership of communities, but rather appreciates that the borders of communities are permeable.

Despite the usefulness of the social network viewpoint, not all social networks can be considered communities. The concept of community is typically associated with qualities such as safety, familiarity, reciprocal caretaking, faithfulness, and acceptance and altruism. In short, communities are seen as something more than just arbitrary networks of social relations. This means that just having a tie with someone inside a community does not automatically make one a member. To truly be a member of a community requires a certain amount of emotional investment in the form of feelings of belonging. The inclusion of such elements has been traditionally used to draw a distinction between organizations and communities, where organizations have been seen as leaning heavily towards instrumental, monetary values. (See e.g. Brint, 2001.)

A process viewpoint reminds us that social networks are constantly evolving, instead of being stabile, unchanging entities. In other words, a community's size, shape, and other characteristics depend on when and from what angle one approaches them. For example, social networks may be either specialized or multiplex; that is, with participants bonded through a single shared interest and a primary focus of discussion, or free to wander "off-topic" and discuss all sorts of other issues and concerns. The stronger the ties and the more multiplex the activities, the more like a community a network will be.

Lastly, all of the aspects presented above emphasise the importance of communication for understanding communities. Communication is intertwined with community throughout the community process. Communication is needed when members of a community define their relative relationships, such as hierarchy. Furthermore, it is through communication that the mutual rules, norms, and sanctions that govern behavior within a community are negotiated. Among other things, these rules and norms help define the extent of individual freedom within the confines of a community (or its tolerance of deviant behavior), and the rules for interaction between members and non-members. To be more precies, one could say that a social system where these matters are not being negotiated and where they are not an important part of the social reality of the system is not a community. (See e.g. Lehtonen, 1990: 25.)

Overall, the general discourse surrounding communities illustrates the multiplicity of contemporary social organizations. It might even be that the social aggregates of today are not that different from those that existed in earlier times, but at least one thing seems certain: in a contemporary network society, our choice of how, when, and why to belong to social networks has increased greatly. To cherish individuality, to gather multiple weak ties, to nurture a certain set of strong ties, to belong to a tribe so deeply that one's individuality dissolves into a collective subject - all of these are valid choices for us living in this era of ever-increasing connectivity.

There is certainly reason to be critical of the concept of virtual or online community. Not every bulletin board, chat group or team of players represents a community. For example, Steven Jones (1997: 16) asserts that, "*Consequently, if we are to create a sense of community beyond mere recognition, we require far more than its construction, physical or virtual - we also require human occupancy, commitment, interaction, and living among and with others.*" At the same time, clinging to old views on the types of social aggregates people should co-exist in bypasses people's own experiences and what is meaningful to them.

# 6 A JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE MULTIPLAYER WORLD

In the previous chapters the groundwork for understanding communication in multiplayer communities has been laid out. The present chapter presents an analysis of the various aspects of communication as it takes place within a multiplayer gaming context and contributes to the creation and maintenance of those social networks that can be called multiplayer communities. This analysis is based on two partly overlapping sets of data. The first set comes from a participant observation of two multiplayer communities. The second set comes from interviewing 15 members of various types of multiplayer communities.

The participant observation took place in a typical MMOG of the 2000s called *Anarchy Online*. It provides a source of naturalistic data. Combining log files with screen shots with field notes, this data presents an insight into the life of two distinct multiplayer communities. The participant observation took place in 2004, starting at the beginning of the year and ending at its end. For the first month of the observation I played mainly with ad-hoc groups or alone before finding a community and being accepted into it. This first community was active until the summer of 2004, when it was abruptly disbanded by its leader. The disbandment led to some members of the community founding a new one. I was invited to join this second community, along with many others. The second community stayed alive for the rest of my participant observation, though later on an interview revealed that it, too, had been disbanded shortly after I had left it at the end of 2004. These two communities will from now on be referred to as Alpha and Beta, respectively.

Both multiplayer communities I belonged to during the participant observation were relatively large, with several dozen members at their peak. Of these, some twenty were active on a regular basis, and approximately six to ten members formed the inner circle of most active members. In comparison to typical MMOG communities both communities could be described as being medium or large (for one way of grouping multiplayer communities by size, see e.g. Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Yee, & Nickell, 2006). The actual amount of members was in a state of constant flux for the entire lifetime of both

communities. In addition different players were active at different times, with only a handful of actives standing steadily at the core of the community effort. Both communities were international. To my knowledge, membership was divided relatively evenly between European and North American players, with few or no players coming from other areas of the world.

In addition to the participant observation I conducted fifteen interviews with members of various multiplayer communities, some of whom belonged to either or both of the communities observed. These accounts provide experiences and attitudes that both resonate with and contradict my analysis based on the participant observation, expanding the analysis beyond a case study.

This chapter starts by discussing those processes through which a single player can become a member of a multiplayer community, and proceeds to analyze the various communicational phenomena that together constitute everyday life in such communities. The presentation follows loosely an exemplary life cycle of a multiplayer community, constructed from the analysis. This life cycle starts from the birth of such a community and proceeds through its everyday existence, finally ending in its disbandment.

In this chapter there are constantly multiple voices present. At times I let the interviewees speak, telling their version of membership in multiplayer communities. At other times there are excerpts from log files gathered during the participant observation. These present a recording of the actual communication that took place while I played, and enable us to see how some communicative processes take place within multiplayer communities. Furthermore, there is my voice, the voice of the researcher. I speak with this voice whenever it is relevant, for example when dealing with the practice of the data-collection process.

## 6.1 In search of a home

This section leads the reader through the initial steps of participant observation. These steps are similar to those any gamer might take when searching for a suitable multiplayer community, whether consciously as in this example, or relatively unconsciously, following the general flow of the game.

The section begins with an account of how difficult it sometimes is to find a virtual world one can call “home”. What follows is an introduction to the game in which the participant observation took place, Anarchy Online. Running in and out of this account is an analysis of the various demands that participant observation as a method, and multiplayer gaming as a context, pose to scholars interested in communication in multiplayer communities. At the end of the section, the process of gaining a membership in a multiplayer community is analyzed.

### 6.1.1 Detours and battlefields

Some of the first decisions made concerning this study were, firstly, to concentrate on communication within multiplayer communities and, secondly, to follow a qualitative, interpretative approach in order to get close to the everyday operations of the said communities. By the beginning of 2004 I had already conducted some initial interviews and was looking for a suitable online multiplayer computer game in which to engage as a participant observer.

As anyone playing computer games knows, the field of possible games is incredibly wide. With new games released monthly, and with some older favorites keeping their value over long periods of time, it is no easy task to find just *one* game one can commit to. That, however, was exactly my intention when I started the participant observation.

The initial plan was to devote most of 2004 to the process of data-collection. With regards to participant observation, the very essence of the method required some kind of long-term investment of time and energy. Even though there are no clear guidelines to the preferred length of participant observation, it is generally agreed that one should be able to commit at least months to it. This is because the process aims at immersion in a social system, something that is unlikely to take place overnight.

From my earlier experience of computer games and myself as a gamer I knew that the game that would finally be the context of my endeavor would have to be of interest to me on a personal level in addition to the scientific one. While the project ahead of me was clearly research work, the idea that I would constantly have to force myself to enter a game made mockery of the concept of multiplayer communities as voluntary social aggregates. The purpose, then, was to find a multiplayer game that would be both promising from a professional perspective and interesting from the personal viewpoint of playing the game for months to come.

The selection process combined my earlier knowledge of computer games with many game reviews from both print media and the Internet. I had but few conditions for the game to meet. First, it had to be large and vibrant enough to support multiple viable sources of data, i.e. multiple multiplayer communities. This meant ruling out some of the smaller MUDs where the total player base could be seen as constituting a single multiplayer community of sorts.

Second, I wanted a game with a graphical user interface since I wanted to keep open the option of observing computer-mediated communication that did not rely solely on text.

Third, I was interested in social aggregates that were clearly too large to be considered groups. This meant leaving out many of those multiplayer games that focused on small teams of players competing against each other.

Fourth, while not crucial to the selection of the game, my knowledge of what multiplayer games had already been the object of scientific research guided the selection to some extent. By 2004, some other MMO-games such as *Everquest* and *Ultima Online* had already received attention from scholars (see

e.g. Castronova, 2001; Yee, 2001; Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Kolo & Baur, 2004). By choosing a game that had not yet been studied much, I hoped to contribute to the general mission of gathering comparable data from various multiplayer contexts.

The first two multiplayer games I considered were called *Shattered Galaxy* and *Runescape*. Most contemporary multiplayer games use free trials or partly free gaming content as a means of advertising the game. Runescape and Shattered Galaxy were no exception to this rule: both games included content that was visible to all players, and they also included more complex content that could only be reached by becoming a paying customer.

Interestingly enough, while there was some social activity in both games' free areas, it quickly became clear to me that the kinds of long-term social networks I was interested in were operating on the paying side only. The part of the games where a new player first walks in was populated mainly by other new players, most of whom did not yet belong to any specific multiplayer community. This was similar to what has been observed in other virtual worlds (see e.g. Kendall, 1999: 70–71). Indeed, the social reality that a player (or a researcher) might encounter upon entering a multiplayer game is often very different from the one that one gains access to after spending some time in the game world. Virtual worlds such as multiplayer games have many layers of social activity, many of which are not visible to an outside observer.

All in all I spent approximately one month getting to know both Shattered Galaxy and Runescape. Both games had some potential from the viewpoint of the study, but the picture of social activities I had constructed from playing and from outside sources such as fan sites was not altogether promising. In addition, I lacked interest in both games, and actually did not enjoy playing them. While quoting lack of interest and enjoyability might seem an odd reason to steer a research project by, it actually has some solid arguments to back it up. Firstly, without sufficient interest in the research subject a data-collection method as demanding as participant observation has less of a chance of succeeding. Secondly, I wanted my experience as a member of a multiplayer community to be as authentic as possible. Enjoyability in a wider sense seems to be a significant factor in experiencing feelings of community in a virtual setting (Koh & Kim, 2004). As a participant observer I was not content to observe alone, but I wanted to also participate in a community effort within a multiplayer game if at all possible. In the end, I ended up stopping both games after the initial trial periods.

### 6.1.2 Welcome to Rubi-Ka! An introduction to Anarchy Online

The third online multiplayer game that I approached was *Anarchy Online*, a science-fiction themed MMOG that would finally become the setting for the participant observation. Launched in 2001 by *Funcom*, a Norwegian gaming company, Anarchy Online represented a typical MMOG in several ways. First, it was a commercial game, where after purchasing the game one had to pay a

monthly fee in order to keep on playing. Second, it was being constantly developed, with add-ons keeping the game fresh for active players. Third, the mechanics of the game favored cooperation and teamwork, which meant that it would probably be possible to find suitable multiplayer communities for the purposes of the research project.

Before committing myself to the game, I gathered information about it from various sources. According to game reviews and player accounts, Anarchy Online had had a difficult start, something not altogether surprising in the context of MMOGs. With a system as complicated and unpredictable as a massive multiplayer game, difficulties in the first stages of publishing a game are common. Typical starting difficulties include technical problems as well as difficulties in securing a large enough player base to keep the game world alive. Anarchy Online seemed to have pulled through its initial birth pains, leading to a relatively stable position among the MMOGs of the time.

As my next step I sought to confirm the existence of social activities within the game. From the official website of the game and from various fan sites and forums a picture of a colorful virtual world emerged, with several prominent groupings of players standing out. Within the game's jargon, these social aggregates were referred to as *organizations* or *ORGs* instead of the commonly used *guilds* or *clans*, but here I will refer to them mostly as multiplayer communities for consistency's sake.

As for the gameplay, Anarchy Online followed a typical model for complex multiplayer games such as MMOGs by offering several partly overlapping modes of gaming. Roughly divided, there were three levels on which one could participate. One could choose to play alone, explore the game world or complete missions designed for single players. One could also participate in groups that ranged typically from three to six people. These groups engaged in both completing story-driven missions and playing just in order to advance their characters. One could also participate in player-versus-player (PVP) gaming, where groups of players engaged each other in a competitive environment. In addition to these levels, the game supported the creation and maintenance of large multiplayer communities by enabling a community to share a chat channel and by adding the name of a character's community to in its description.

To get into a game as complicated as typical modern MMOGs requires more than simply buying the game package and starting to play. When I started participant observation in Anarchy Online I was not fully prepared for the wide variety of skills and knowledge I needed to learn in order to play the game properly. I have a lifelong history as a computer gamer, and thought that the game would be relatively simple to master. What I found out was that while the basic gameplay of Anarchy Online was simple enough, the sheer number of details that constitute the game's content was difficult to assimilate. Reading the 100-page manual of the game and practicing in the area of the game reserved for new players was a prerequisite for the long process of learning the game.

Luckily for me, and for most players of such complex multiplayer games, there were helping hands there. While a MMOG such as Anarchy Online might be too difficult to master by any single player alone, it is typical for players of multiplayer games to share their knowledge with other players (see e.g. Taylor, 2003b: 9). For example, in Anarchy Online helping other players was encouraged by the game's officials. The official website of the game advised all those about to download the beginner's guide of the game that, "[…] *the best help is always to be found within the game: ask others for help! People are usually happy to be of assistance, and you may even make some new friends while you're at it*".

Helping other players to master the game occurs both in the game and outside of it. In Anarchy Online there were specifically appointed volunteers who devoted a part of their playing time to helping out new players. These so-called Advisors of Rubi-Ka, or ARKs for short, were a special organization supported by the game's developers. For the publisher of the game, these volunteers operated as the first line of customer service, taking care of many small and large needs coming from the larger player base. For example, during my first couple of gaming events when I was just getting to know Rubi-Ka, as the game world was called, I was frequently approached by ARKs who asked whether I needed any help with the game.

In addition to offering support within games, players of MMOGs typically help other players by creating unofficial guides and walkthroughs. These guides often offer invaluable information not available through the official manuals and help files.

Mastering a MMOG, then, is very much a communal activity. Indeed, these types of games are typically made to be so complex that an individual is hard pressed to find out everything by him or herself. Actually, from a game design viewpoint the possibility of players finding out everything there is to know about the game is disastrous. With nothing to find and no challenge presented to them, a significant part of the appeal of these games is lost (see e.g. Aarseth, 2003).

In addition to the skills and knowledge needed to participate as a member of a multiplayer community, a researcher needs both material and temporal resources. Many of the new online computer games require a fairly new and powerful computer and a fast Internet connection to function properly. In addition, the games themselves might require money to play. Often one has not only to buy the individual software, but also to continue paying on a monthly basis throughout the period of gaming. Luckily for me as a researcher, my university was able to support this research project by funding the costs of playing and by providing a computer on which I could play during work hours. This support was invaluable for the success of the data collection process, even if in fact I ended up playing mostly on my home computer, for reasons which are presented below.

Even more important than material resources are the time requirements that online computer games might impose on the researcher. For example, a typical playing session of Anarchy Online lasted from one to five hours, with some people staying online for much longer periods of time. In addition, most

of the popular online computer games are synchronous. This means that the time of day can have an effect on the number of community members online. In my case, both communities I belonged to were international, with members from Europe and North America. This meant that because of the time difference the most active gaming occurred in the very late or early hours of the day.

The time-consuming nature of online computer games can be weary even for an experienced gamer. Moreover, in a game that is active twenty-four hours a day, it is not always clear that one can participate in all the activities one would like to. Rather, the researcher is forced to accept that the data will capture only a sample of the total social interaction occurring in the game – in much the same way as in a "real-life" setting.

Only after learning the initial skills and knowledge required to complete missions and participate in ad hoc groups did the game of Anarchy Online start for real. During the first month or so of playing I was a part of dozens of temporary groups of players, making acquaintances along the way. In addition I developed my main character to higher levels and researched various game-related web sites and forums for a suitable community to approach with the purpose of applying for membership.

### 6.1.3 Becoming a member

Our journey continues with an analysis of becoming a member, a process that is for many their first glimpse into multiplayer communities. Upon discussing the process of becoming a member we will touch briefly on several other communication phenomena within multiplayer communities, such as rituals, rules, and roles, all of which will be discussed in greater detail later on.

As we have seen in the discussion of computer-mediated social networks (sub-section 5.1.2), it is possible that their borders are permeable, the more so the larger they are. This means that there can be constant movement at the "edges" of a multiplayer community. In a large enough community even the leaders may have difficulties in naming all the members. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, questions of inclusion and exclusion are ever present in the social reality of multiplayer communities.

Before looking at the actual process of joining, let us consider briefly the motivations behind such an act. These motivations resonate with those that lead to the creation of multiplayer communities, presented in the next section. For now, however, our viewpoint is that of an individual wanting to become a member.

#### Motivations behind joining a multiplayer community

Multiplayer communities offer their members many substantial benefits. On the level of gameplay, the relatively stable social structure of multiplayer communities helps players to comply with possible requirements of cooperation a game might impose. By repeatedly gaming with community

members, players can reach levels of cooperation that are hard to achieve with one-off acquaintances:

> ”[…] I sometimes play in some new clans with new people, and there is actually no chance to win against more experienced, better opponents. You just can’t make the team work if you don’t know the other one, like when he’s going to load the gun or throw the grenade. It really helps when you have played long enough to know things like that. For example, with [name] we have played these two against two games and we haven’t lost any of them yet (laughs). Yeah, I can pretty well say when [name] will go in from a door or attack. Like how he works. For the most part knowing the other players is that important.”
> (Interviewee K)

In a typical MMOG such as Anarchy Online, another gameplay-related benefit of belonging to a community is access to better resources. These resources might be both knowledge-based and material (naturally in a virtual world sense). Asking for help is often simpler within the community framework than asking help from strangers. Also material help, often in the form of ingame money or equipment, is more readily offered in the context of a community. A fine example of the significance of ingame benefits a multiplayer community can bestow on its members comes from my participant observation in Anarchy Online.

As is often the case in MMOGs, the game world is divided into distinct areas. Some of these areas are sold to players as separate add-ons to the main game. During my first months of participant observation, I had been playing mostly in one such area in Anarchy Online. I had access to the other areas or parts of the game as well, but had chosen to concentrate on the one I had started from. When I finally left this initial area of the game, it became clear that while I had become well versed in that particular part of the game, my knowledge of the game as a whole was seriously lacking. Faced with a totally new environment I felt very much like starting all over again - not an overly frightening prospect, but definitely one that promised to be time-consuming.

However, unlike upon entering Anarchy Online and Rubi-Ka for the first time, this time around I was already a member of a multiplayer community. Instead of looking for answers on web pages or learning by trial and error, I could turn to my fellow members with my questions. By doing so I was acting very typically, as asking for advice or help from community members is one of the most common functions of communication evident in multiplayer communities according to both the participant observation data and interviews.

The amount of help and support I received from my fellow members cannot be overstated. In mere days I learned from them as much as I had learned in the previous weeks and months of playing. One incident was especially relevant, when another member devoted hours of his time to teaching me to handle the aspects of the game that were new to me. He not only immediately answered my plea for help, but also stuck with me for several hours despite the fact that he gained nothing (in game terms) during that whole evening. In a game where constant advancement and developing your character

are among the main incentives to playing, his act speaks volumes about the kind of atmosphere within our community.

Another telling incident happened when I encountered monetary problems in the game. As is typical of MMOGs, Anarchy Online had an internal financial system with currency and goods of all kinds. Of particular value were the vehicles used for transportation, since they enabled fast movement from place to place when completing missions. Of these the most valued were a kind of plane, a *Yalmaha*, that exceeded my character's funds tenfold. After discussing this with my community, the other members organized an impromptu fundraiser that resulted in me getting the vehicle of my choice. Had I played solo, it would have taken several weeks to collect such funds because the character with which I was playing at the time was not designed for solo-gaming or quick fundraising. The following excerpt concerns this incident:

| | |
|---|---|
| "Groo": | I tried to do a solo mission, but the running distances were too big...would need a Yalmaha. Where are you at? |
| "Spiritinker": | How much are you short? |
| "Groo": | heh, a lot:) I don´t even dream of such yet |
| "Spiritinker": | how much? |
| "Dawnsword": | Groo I think TroubledMan has some cash... he can lend/give ya |
| "Groo": | what, like millions? Or how much are they? |
| "Spiritinker": | Groo... I have spare 3mln if You like |
| "Demeter": | if we all put some in it you should be able to afford it :) |
| "Dawnsword": | TroubledMan has 6mil on him I think |
| "Spiritinker": | Sure |
| "Groo": | (jaw just hit the ground with an audible thump) |
| "Spiritinker": | Groo, come to hill |
| "Demeter": | I got a little over 5 |
| "Spiritinker": | lets make donation |
| "Groo": | I´m coming to the hill |
| "Spiritinker": | I give 3 |
| "Groo": | I have almost one |
| "Spiritinker": | move your ass to hill and we will buy You a Yalm ;) |
| "Groo": | Indeed! |

[Here I saw the other player, Spirit, hovering above me in his own Yalmaha that looked like a white arrow or a bird.]

| | |
|---|---|
| "Groo": | you´re like a big white bird |
| "Spiritinker": | 3 millions ;) |

[Spirit gives me the money, and confirms that I received it without problems.]

| | |
|---|---|
| "Groo": | (faints) |
| "Spiritinker": | you have it? |
| "Groo": | Yes |
| "Spiritinker": | Lol |
| "Groo": | just need to rest a bit |
| "Dawnsword": | shout if ya need TroubledMan, as I am helping Grimjohn get last part of shoulderpads |

"Spiritinker": how much short?
"Groo": I have now 4
"Spiritinker": Demet?
"Spiritinker": can you chip in?
"Demeter": yes, I can make a quick trip over there I think
"Spiritinker": ok, cool :-), thx

This kind of behavior does not represent pure altruism, even though there might be a trace of it here. Rather, the other community members' behavior conformed to the overall norms of reciprocity that were evident in the community, something that I will discuss further in sub-section 6.5.1.

Some multiplayer communities include role-playing elements in their operation. These elements, such as story-telling and playing "in character"[19] are typically absent from the basic gameplay of MMOGs because they require collective effort and not all players are equally interested in them. No matter how hard any one player tries to take on an imaginary role, sufficient immersion cannot be achieved if other players refuse to act along. Many MMOGs try to solve this problem by offering their players specific role-playing servers with their own strict sets of rules. Sometimes the whole populations of these servers might be seen as having communal characteristics. That is, the players within these servers might see themselves as similar, or they might share similar behavior and circumstances (Jenkins, 1996: 81). From the viewpoint of this study it is more important to notice that despite there being possibly significant similarities among larger aggregates of players, they still constitute smaller and more cohesive social networks as well.

Multiplayer communities can also offer their members benefits that are not directly related to the gameplay. Sociability is a major factor in the motivations that drive people to form groups and communities even within otherwise extremely task-oriented multiplayer contexts. Indeed, it seems that even the most competitive multiplayer communities think of themselves as being "social" (Williams et al., 2006: 345).

In conclusion, there is a variety of reasons for a player to seek membership in a multiplayer community. Some of these reasons are directly related to gameplay, while others are more general in nature.

Here it has to be noted that in certain situations it is possible to gain some of the benefits of membership without being an official member. For example, a person who has joined another community might still keep in touch with his or her old friends in the previous community, and even join in the conversation in the community's chat channels and message boards. While MMOGs such as Anarchy Online allow one character to be associated with only one multiplayer community at a time, it is possible to join in other communities' channels as a guest.

The division between member and guest highlights the problem of defining membership. In this study, I consider membership as something that is evident in social interaction as well as in belief, as opposed to something that is

---

19 Taking on the role of a character as completely as possible.

an individual's conception only. By "evident in social interaction" I do not mean mere association through external symbols, such as wearing a certain name badge. Rather, I mean that for a person to be considered a member of a multiplayer community, this membership should somehow manifest itself in his or her actual behavior in the social reality of the community. Adapting a set of questions by Wilson (1973: 308) that can be helpful in defining membership, one can look at an individual's behavior and ask: 1) with whom does the individual interact most, with fellow members or people not associated with the community? 2) Has the individual changed his behavior to accord with that which is normative in the multiplayer community? 3) Does the individual tend to follow the community in its decision making or does he or she exhibit independence of mind? 4) Does the individual openly share the goals of the community to the exclusion of his or her own personal preferences?

Naturally, these questions do not cover the whole scope of memberships, and some might be more relevant in a given community than others. Still, they bring across the basic concept of membership as something more than just a cognitive concept or an external label.

**Getting accepted in a community**

The initiative to become a member of a multiplayer community can originate from either side. A player might request permission to join, or he or she can be recruited by existing members. During such a recruiting process, a member of the community approaches the candidate and asks him or her to join in.

Many multiplayer communities, especially those that include a heavy task-related element, expect their membership applicants to prove themselves in some way before granting them access. The purpose of this process is to make sure that the new member fits in with the values and goals of the community. Some communities stress the task-related competence of the applicant, whereas other communities try to make sure that the applicant can adhere to the overall ethical and practical values that are important to the community:

> "[…] usually it happens that someone or some people evaluate the applicant's playing skills. And in addition to the skills they also evaluate the possibilities he has of participating in the communication channels, like IRC. And then in BatMud there were clans where you had to give a certain amount of money or items or your time to a clan, and in another game you had to prove that you are an all-round good guy. You could prove your goodness for example by helping smaller players if you belonged to a clan who tried to be virtuous. And then when you had proof that you had smoothed the hair of sufficiently many new players and they said yes, he is a good guy, then you could get in. In a way it was like some sort of a sponsorship. But there in Half Life-surroundings it is more about being a spectator behind the player's head and looking at what he is doing."
> (Interviewee A)

Especially in large, established communities it is typical to find members whose specific role is to recruit and test newcomers. The purpose of such screening is to make sure that the applicant fits the community, for example by being a good enough player or sharing a similar orientation towards gaming and life in multiplayer communities. Depending on the life stage of the community, this drafting procedure might be easy or difficult for the applicant. A highly competitive group of players who are in the process of advancing in an organized tournament or a similar ranking system can pose serious demands on new applicants. In other cases, it is possible to slip in and become a member without the need to prove oneself. This happens especially when the community itself has approached a well-known player and asked him or her to join in. In addition, a newcomer might be able to bypass the possible screening process if the community is still young and in dire need of increasing its membership, or when the recommendation of a trusted member serves as trump card:

> "No, in the beginning they didn't really have any kind of tests or anything, because there were just three or four of them so they just wanted people. But then the more famous you get, the more I suppose you start asking, that you are supposed to be good, that you are supposed to be a good player and all."
> (Interviewee F)

> "[…] if you have like a respected rank-and-file member of the clan, he can recommend someone and that someone gets in immediately. You don't even need to check the guy out if he says that I have played with this guy."
> (Interviewee A)

After approximately one month of playing Anarchy Online I started to look actively for possible multiplayer communities to join, because it was clear that I could not gather the type of data I required for the study by staying alone. My initial plan was simple enough. First, I searched the Internet for multiplayer communities operating in the game. Searching the Internet instead of looking in the game had the advantage of letting me choose communities that had newsgroups or other similar means of communication outside the game. It seemed that having a means of communication outside the game would make it easier for me to approach the communities. After locating some possible communities, I slooked for the e-mail addresses of their leaders. My plan was to approach these leaders with an open letter, explain my situation and ask whether they thought it was okay for me to join their clan. After that, I would approach the whole community through the newsgroup, explain my position again, and ask whether they would have anything against me joining their community with both professional and private goals. Interestingly enough, I never got into the actual writing part of the plan before I was drafted into a clan inside the game.

During one typical gaming session I was resting my character in between missions in an area generally used for such "downtime". While resting, I was approached by another player with whom I had teamed up sometime earlier.

This person started to chat with me about the game and my preferences while playing it. What had started as a simple chit chat quickly turned into an interview when it became clear that he was a high-ranking member of a community, and that his community was on the lookout for possible new members.

The interview was relatively short, as we had obviously dealt with many issues already when we played together earlier. The person interviewing me said that how I had acted in the team had had a considerable effect on his decision to approach me. Soon enough we concluded that the socially oriented goals of the community might fit my playing style and person, and before I knew it I was a member on probation.

In a multiplayer community that is experiencing a heavy period of growth, the introduction of new members is something of an everyday phenomenon. Members of such communities are therefore used to people coming and going, and the introduction of every new member is not treated as something special. In the next excerpt we see how nonchalant, if friendly, were the first greetings I received upon entering the main communication channel of the community:

> 19:03: Starlet: welcome groo!
> 19:03: Groo: hello all:)
> 19:03: Starlet: glad to have ya aboard =D
> 19:03: Granuzida: Groo is a Doc, I just met him in Aban.
> 19:04: Groo: newbie doc at that, but very helpful with these big hands of mine. Hardly ever dropped the scalpel!
> 19:04 Starlet: hehe
> 19:04 Starlet: at last a doc
> […]
> 19:09 Orbital: welcome:)
> 19:09 Groo: hi cloudsreach
> 19:09 Granuzida: Cool!
> 19:09 Granuzida: Welcome!
> 19:09 Cloudreach: heya!
> […]
> 19:10 Shreed: And you are so welcome Groo
> 19:10 Groo: thank you:)
> […]
> 19:13 Granuzida: Glad to have you onboard. I have to log now. Happy Hunting

Being so abruptly recruited into the organization generated a problem for me. Since I had not entered the community the way I had planned, and since the whole recruiting situation had happened so fast, I had not had the opportunity to talk about my dual role as gamer and as researcher. Discussion of how I solved this problem is presented below.

**Gaining trust - a researchers viewpoint**

There is an interesting dialectical tension between trusting and not trusting interaction partners in a CMC context. Net users typically show great trust in their interaction partners by not only being willing to communicate with strangers, but also by confiding in them and helping them (Wellman & Gulia, 1999: 340–342). At the same time we teach our children never to trust people they meet online, ranging from not sharing personal information to not arranging meetings with them.

Communication networks often make it possible for people to remain anonymous as communicators. This quality of CMC has been linked to questions of trust in both academic and popular discourse. Almost everyone dealing with the net has seen Peter Steiner's 1993 comic from *The New Yorker*, where two dogs are pondering the question on anonymity online with the line, *"On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog"*. While telecommunications experts might say that the communication networks of the mid 2000s provide actually a surprisingly large amount of information on their users, in the minds of ordinary users trust is not something inherently linked to communication in an online setting.

This general tendency to mistrust relative strangers can make it difficult for the researcher to convince participants in a study of the legitimacy and intentions of the study. There are some, if limited, ways in which the researcher can try to make his or her person, and the study, more trustworthy in the eyes of the participants. These include strategies of transparency achieved through institutional web pages, the use of institutional addresses, logos, and other such symbols. Also, questions of language use might need to be focused on. (see e.g. Catteral & Maclaran, 2001; Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Stanford & Tauder, 2003.) Figure 3 shows how this research project was presented in the WWW at the time of the study.

Despite the researcher's best efforts to convince the participants about the intentions and legitimacy of the study, it might be that people simply do not want to be studied. When combined with questions regarding the pseudo-public nature of many communication networks, this seemingly simple situation can lead to highly complex questions regarding ethicality. Some of these questions were analyzed in more detail in sub-section 3.2.3.

As a researcher, gaining the trust of my fellow gamers was of the utmost importance to me. During the research process, questions of trust were especially relevant in the early days of my participant observation, just after being recruited into Alpha. The actual recruiting process had taken me somewhat by surprise, as I had planned on approaching a community as a researcher first, and a gamer only second. What happened was totally the opposite: I was recruited as a player first, and then faced the problem of how to tell the community about my dual role. I was nervous about this, even though I knew that disclosing my position as a researcher might not automatically lead

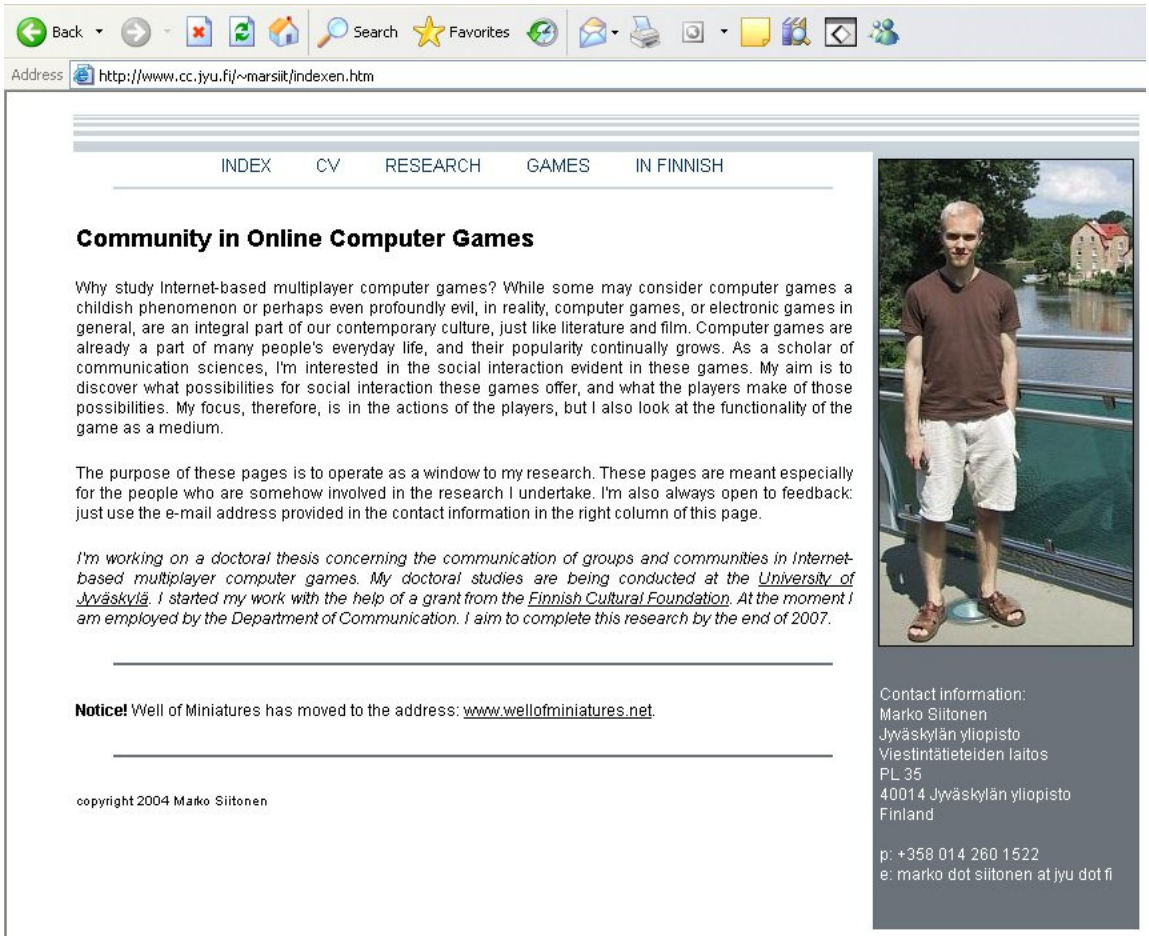


FIGURE 3 Presenting the research project in the World Wide Web

to being excluded from the community (e.g. Reid, 1996). Still, in an online setting disclosure concerning a research agenda can contain a certain level of risk, sometimes even leading to instant expulsion (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004).

The multiplayer community I had entered was only just in the process of establishing a web-forum, which meant that I needed to find a way to tell the community about the study during the game. I wrote a letter in which I talked about myself, and my research, and posted that letter on a university-related institutional web page behind a hidden address. This was done so that only the people to whom I told the direct address could access it. The plan was to log into the game, tell people briefly about the research, and then advise them to go to the aforementioned address to read more about it.

After completing these initial steps I logged into the game. To my relief I saw that the founder and leader of the community was also online. I quickly contacted him (there was a strong indication that the person behind the character was male) on a private channel inside the game, and asked whether he would have time to hear me out. After briefly outlining my position as a researcher I was surprised to hear his short reaction, which was, "Cool!" Indeed, I had the impression that he had nothing against my study. He was of the opinion that I should just go ahead and talk about it on the community chat channel. Encouraged, though still apprehensive, I proceeded to talk about my

research on the chat channel. Again, the reaction was mainly positive or indifferent:

> 22:26: Groo: okay, I seem to have some time here and now, so I'll pest you all:) I talked with Bourne about this already, but since the forum of the org is not yet reaching everyone, I guess I'll have to do it here. […]
>
> [Here I proceed to explain the purpose of the study in detail to those on the community chat channel.]
>
> 22:29: Gordagan: so what are you researching?
> 22:29: Mistforce: Groo... get to the point man
> 22:29: Mistforce: :)
> 22:30: Groo: social aspects of these games, mainly the communication
> 22:30: Groo: heh
>
> [Another long explanation.]
>
> 22:30: Groo: sorry, I'm blubbering
> 22:30: Mistforce: a
> 22:30: Gordagan: ah, good one...charge the game to the university, eh?
> 22:30: Groo: ;)
> 22:30: Leeloo: i killed my first ely heck :)
> 22:30: Mistforce: nice
> 22:30: Gordagan: cool, well done
> 22:30: Mistforce: on both counts
> 22:30: Groo: actually I still pay this myself, but I am allowed to play in the work-hours, too
> 22:30: Gordagan: heheh
> 22:30: Mistforce: lol, now thats a job!
> 22:31: Groo: Because I play so many games, that it would make no sense
> 22:31: Groo: indeed! talking about choosing a career...
> 22:31: Gordagan: do we get to be in a thesis?
> 22:32: Mistforce: or just get paid :)
> 22:32: Groo: But anyway, I just want you all to know who I am also on the other side of this screen. I know many researchers don't think that that is important, but I do
> 22:32: Mistforce: ok thx Groo
> 22:32: Leya: As long as you love me its ok :P
> 22:32: Groo: I'm working on a grant, so I'm most probably even poorer than you are;) but a thesis, yes, in some three years. It's a PhD
> 22:32: Gordagan: can you blank out my face and change my voice for the cameras?
> 22:32: Groo: I love you, Leya!
> 22:32: Mistforce: lol
> 22:32: Leya: :D
> 22:33: Mistforce: hmmm 3 against one...
> 22:33: Gordagan: oh, and dont tell them where i got my sword....we'll keep this styg desolator thing unique
> 22:33: Gordagan: ...bugger too late
> 22:33: Leya: Leeloo gratz on your spider hm Hecklers I ment :D
> 22:34: Groo: Gordagan: seriously speaking, of course, I'll make every effort to protect the identities here. On a sidenote, perhaps I'll make an exception in your case...just in case:)

> 22:35: Groo: but heck, it seems that most of the people here are too high level for me to party with
> 22:35: Gordagan: then i'd better keep this mask on
> 22:35: Groo: :P

It seemed that all my fears about being kicked out of the community were unfounded, as some of the members came over to me as being rather interested in the study and wanting to know more about it. On the other hand, other topics concerning the game continued uninterrupted throughout my "confession," and even after I had finished I had the distinct feeling that this revelation was nothing ground breaking for them. This was the first time I talked about my dual role, but not the last one. During the year of participant observation there were multiple occasions when I clarified my role as a researcher. Sometimes I did this in a quieter moment in gaming, or when there were particularly many new characters on the chat channel, sometimes I explained myself during a community meeting. I was careful not to overdo my "coming out", though, as I was not always sure whether the players behind the characters had already heard my story and would be irritated by being constantly reminded of it. All in all, I mentioned the research approximately once a month, not including times when I was not playing, such as vacations. At times I had the feeling that this was too frequently, and at other times I felt that I should have tried more determinedly to talk about the study. Interestingly enough, I did not receive a single negative remark upon revealing the research. Rather, it seemed like the people I played with liked the fact that I was straightforward with them. In addition, the topic did not come up during any of the three interviews with community members, indicating that at least I had managed to avoid becoming an annoyance.

It is interesting to compare these findings to those of Hudson and Bruckman (2004). In their study, they encountered rejection and even hostility upon revealing their true intentions as researchers. There are several factors that could explain this difference. First, while Hudson and Bruckman were relative outsiders to the groups they tried to gain access to, a researcher who has joined a multiplayer community has already entered into the sacred realm of gamers, attained a position within the larger sub-culture. Second, a researcher who just observes can be seen as an equivalent of a free rider, a lurker, whereas a researcher conducting participant observation in multiplayer communities does not usually just tag along. Instead, the researcher participates in the activities of the community, and becomes a productive member of it. Third, the way I managed to out myself as a researcher was interpersonal in nature, as opposed to a more general announcement - the likes of which I was planning originally. Still, it is possible that the discrepancy between these two studies is not based on differences in context, but in differences in individual instances. Clearly, more research on this topic is needed before generalizations can be made.

## 6.2 Knotting together the community network

For a social network to become a community there are certain requirements to be met, as we saw in sub-section 5.1.1. Social systems such as communities are not something that can suddenly come into being without any previous history. Rather, some time is required for a shared symbolic reality and meaningful relationships between members to form. There are several ways in which a multiplayer community can come into being. This section analyses the processes that lead to the creation of multiplayer communities as depicted in the interviews and evident in the participant observation data. We start by looking at the dynamics of ad-hoc groups in multiplayer games, as well as the reasons for the emergence of longer-lasting social networks. After that we proceed to look at the process of negotiating shared values and goals. Finally, issues of communication channels are discussed, as they are especially relevant for budding communities operating in a technologically mediated environment.

### 6.2.1 The birth of a multiplayer community

Within the context of online multiplayer games, various kinds of social aggregates flourish. The very basic idea of multiplayer games is to bring a group of people together in a joint activity of playing a game, whether against one another or together against a common enemy provided by the game. This general setting encourages the creation of ad-hoc groups.

In Anarchy Online and similar MMOGs, there is usually a constant dance of joining and separating going on. This is made easy by dedicated chat channels where short-term alliances are being sought out. On these channels, messages such as "*lvl 50 med lft*" (which stands for "Level 50 medic looking for team") are common as players seek potential groups. Once such a group is founded, it tends to stay together for as long as it provides its members benefits, or as long as its members can keep up with it. The members of such groups often change, with fresh players replacing those who leave.

These kinds of ad hoc groups are akin to such naturally forming groups as can be found everywhere where team-oriented games and sports are played. Like youngsters in a park might gather together to play football, players of a multiplayer game join with others to make the game experience more meaningful.

There is usually no straight link between such ad hoc groups and long-term multiplayer communities. It is practically unheard of that members of a one-off group suddenly decide that they all want to form a longer lasting relationship with one another. Yet these groups do serve an important purpose in the general dynamics of relationship forming between players. Positive and negative experiences are often not only used as a basis for future group selection, but also transmitted to other players via the grapevine. This means that a player who constantly breaks the norms of the game is quickly left on his

or her own, as no one will want to group with a person who has a bad reputation. An ad hoc group that managed to serve the needs of its members particularly well might lead to those players returning to the same group again, which in turn might lead to more stable relationships between them.

Yet another function of such ad hoc groups is that players who make a positive impression operating in them have a definite advantage when it comes to recruiting new members to existing communities. An example of this kind of development was given in sub-section 6.1.3, where I recounted the story of how I was recruited into a multiplayer community.

To fulfill the requirements of a community a social aggregate needs time. Quite simply, a group of people cannot just instantaneously decide that they are a community, or start to experience feelings of community because they suddenly feel like it. Since a community by definition requires relationships between its members and some kind of shared understanding of what the community is about, it therefore follows that a community has to be preceded by some sort of social organization. In some cases that social organization might be a community in itself, but it might just as well be a group, or a loose network of friends and acquaintances, for example.

How, then, are multiplayer communities born? In the data there were two main paths of social network development that seemed to lead to their emergence. First, it happens that formerly unknown players form interpersonal relationships with one another, and that these relationships then start to develop together, eventually forming a network. Such networks, whether they have originated in face-to-face settings or through CMC, then operate as the basis on which a community-like social structure emerges.

Another way in which multiplayer communities can be born is if they are founded on existing long-term relationships. These include off-line relations such as relatives, school friends, or work mates playing together, and those instances when members of existing multiplayer communities form a new community. Of these, the case of a new community being based on earlier community ties is one that I encountered during my participant observation, and we will return to this particular phenomenon in sub-section 6.5.3.

However the initial relationships between players are formed, not all social networks develop into multiplayer communities. Here a process viewpoint is particularly useful, reminding us of the dynamic nature of social networks. Looking at the histories of established multiplayer communities as presented in the data, it was typical to find at least one period of time during which their existence was uncertain, if not threatened. During these periods matters such as membership growth and negotiating shared values and goals are of the utmost importance. An excerpt from an interview with the leader of a multiplayer community provides an enlightening example of a typical process that can be found behind many an existing multiplayer community:

> ”Well this first community, [name of the community] was born when I decided with a friend that now we’ll make a clan. Then we established it, and when we were playing on public servers we asked people to join us. And of course they then had contacts elsewhere. We could then join in with them and go and talk on many channels, and that way we got to know more people and more people also joined in. But it started with one like that. Now we have many, for example I have visited several [Finnish] towns, I have visited all around and even stayed over night.”
> (Interviewee K)

While the concept of a smaller social network gradually developing into a larger one and acquring the characteristics of a community is intuitively appealing, it is by no means simple to achieve. There seems to be an evolutionary process that multiplayer communities have to go through, with most of them either remaining small in size or perishing along the way. Typically MMOGs host a large amount of small groups compared to larger communities, with huge communities of more than 150 members being relatively rare (Williams et al., 2006).

Naturally, multiplayer games differ in the extent to which they encourage large social networks over smaller ones. Therefore, the process described here applies mainly to those multiplayer games where the dynamics of the game enable, benefit, or require cooperation between large numbers of players.

In conclusion it can be said that multiplayer communities are continuing and dynamic processes. In a typical social reality of a multiplayer game there are constantly new relationships born and old ones dying away. Similarly, there is a constant stream of new small groups, many of which disband before growing in size or developing actual symbolic community. To evolve into a community a social network must engage in many simultaneous processes of negotiating values, goals, norms, rules, and roles, among others. All of these facets of the community process are given space in the following sections. The first one to receive our attention is the process of establishing shared values and goals.

### 6.2.2 Establishing the groundwork - shared values and goals

A community needs to be more than just a loose collection of individuals in order to exist over a prolonged period of time. Without cohesion and a shared feeling of community the motivation of individual members becomes increasingly difficult to keep up. This is especially true in computer-mediated contexts, where mere physical presence cannot compensate for lack of participation, as it might do in face-to-face contexts.

There is seldom unanimous agreement on the values and goals of a given community. Rather both are negotiated time and time again during various stages of the community process. Still, it is important to have at least some sort of shared ideological foundation that most members can relate to. Such an agreement of the basis on which the community is built is necessary for the emergence of a shared feeling of community (Beniger, 1986). Furthermore, an

individual member's identification with the community can benefit from the ability to embrace the values and goals of the community. When identifying with a community, a member comes to see the community as being definitive of oneself and forms a psychological connection to it (for a thorough discussion of identification, see e.g. Connaughton & Daly, 2005).

Put simply, a member of a community should be able to support the values and goals of the community. If he or she can do that, it should improve identification and commitment. If he or she cannot, it should be detrimental. As we shall see in sub-section 6.6.1, differences in personal and communal values and goals can lead to conflicts. These conflicts may result in the member leaving the community either voluntarily or forced out by others, or even, in extreme cases, the disbandment of the community.

The question is, then, how do networks of loose individual social ties start to develop into more stable groups and communities in multiplayer games, and how do they go about negotiating shared values and goals?

**Commonality**

The basis of any community is *commonality* or *similarity*, i.e. having something in common. Commonalty can stem from many things, including shared experiences, background, preferences, and ambitions. At the very least, the members of a multiplayer community share an interest in belonging to social networks within online multiplayer games. Not taking into account some rare examples where an online community uses a multiplayer game merely as a setting for other activities, members of multiplayer communities also typically share an interest in computer gaming.

Commonality, then, can help explain why certain players form relationships with one another in the first place. For example, while modern communication technologies surpass the limitations of geography, the social networks operating with their help are often affected by existing national, cultural, and language boundaries. In the multiplayer gaming context this is evident in the tendency for players to group together on the basis of shared language, culture, or even time zones (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003).

The participant observation data from Anarchy Online gives us an example of such off-game commonalities affecting social organization within the game. While the communities I belonged to during the participant observation were multinational, I also had access to a special chat channel that was reserved for Finnish participants only. This channel was kept up by some Finnish players and could be used to ask other players for help or to seek gaming company. The channel was in no way official, that is, it was not initiated or run by the company behind the game. The channel certainly did not reach all the Finnish players of Anarchy Online, as it only had a handful of members at the time I encountered it, and as I had personally encountered Finnish players who did not know of its existence. It is actually likely that there were, or had been, other similar chat channels that I was not aware of. Knowledge of this channel was passed on informally on the grapevine. If,

during the game, a Finnish player in the know found out that his or her gaming partner was Finnish, details of how to join the channel were passed on. Conversation on this channel was sparse, as practically all the people who had access to it also had access to other similar channels within their multiplayer communities. Perhaps because of this redundancy, and perhaps because most of the Finnish players knew enough English, the loose social network surrounding the chat channel never developed into anything more organized. It does, however, present us with an example of the kind of commonality that *could* have operated as a base for a more cohesive community.

Grasping the concept of commonality is but the first step in understanding what binds a community together. This is because despite its apparent value in explaining community ties, commonality alone is not enough to lead to the emergence of community. Indeed, it is typical for a large number of people to have something in common without it actually leading up to the kind of social organization that we are interested in in this study. An example might be the whole population of a multiplayer game, who certainly have something in common with one another but do not necessarily form any singular, cohesive community. What any long-lasting community needs, then, is to develop this commonality further in a process of negotiating its values and goals.

**Negotiating shared values**

The values and goals of a community can be seen as a broad framework that leans in some particular direction - for example, a multiplayer community might stress competitive aspects or it might value social ties above all else (see e.g. Williams et al., 2006: 344–346). It is often difficult to separate a community's values from its goals. Basically, every declared goal can be seen as being based on a value. The underlying values of a community are reflected in various aspects of its operation, such as norms and rules. Because of this, we shall see traces of values and goals throughout chapter six.

In a multiplayer community, the values and goals are not necessarily something that every member is constantly aware of. For example, many of the interviewees spoke vaguely of "having fun" and "enjoying the game" when talking about the goals of their communities. On the other hand, when asked about different themes, such as the impact that belonging to a community can have on an individual member, they brought up more elaborate and specific value-structures within their communities.

In the data of this study, there were several examples of underlying values. These values were reciprocity between members, appreciation of active and skillful participation in the game as well as active participation in the community effort, (pseudo)altruistic behavior in the form of helping weaker players both within and without the community, gaining power and glory, and keeping the community alive over a long period of time. The two most common and overarching value-structures on which a multiplayer community effort was based in the data were task-oriented competitiveness and sociability:

> "[…] when the same people have been there for a long enough time it goes that people stay there because the others are friends, regardless of whether the game goes badly. For example, we have a pretty…well, the leaders know each other and that makes it difficult to face out without actually quitting the whole thing."
> (Interviewee F)

A multiplayer community often tends towards one or other of these general values, even though they are not mutually exclusive. For example, some online computer games, most notably first person shooters (FPSs), are known for the tournaments and leagues organized around the gaming experience. Multiplayer communities that want to excel in this kind of competitive environment might want to focus on task-related collaboration among their members. Still, even competitive multiplayer communities can see themselves as having a social function (see e.g. Williams et al., 2006: 345).

While not necessarily mutually exclusive, values within multiplayer communities can be contradictory or not shared by everyone. A community might appreciate sociability above all, for example, and there might be an ethos within the community that winning in the game is not important. Still, actually confronted with a long period of losing in the game the community members might notice that they do value doing well in the game as well, and that constant failure is troublesome to many members. Another example would be a community that appreciates equality between members and a level playing field where everyone has the same possibilities, but at the same time keeps up a strict hierarchy of power that is based on individual skill and contribution to the community (for an example of the latter in a MUD-environment, see Pargman, 2005).

Negotiating values and goals does not stop at the point when they are first established. Communities often have to adjust to changing situations by re-negotiating already established values and goals. Such instances include recruiting new members, dealing with old members leaving, solving conflicts, and choosing leaders. As an example of these, the event of recruiting new members is discussed in the following paragraph. The other instances are covered in detail in their respective sections within chapter six.

Entry into a multiplayer community includes typically some sort of period of time during which the applicant and the community measure each other's needs against what the other has to offer. This often takes the form of a screening process or a probation period. During this time, the applicant must prove that he or she is worthy of membership in the community. From the viewpoint of the applicant, this period is a chance to see whether the community fits his or her individual requirements. From the viewpoint of the community, a screening process is used to make sure that every new member can adhere to the values and goals of the community. To this end, many multiplayer communities employ specially appointed testers. The ultimate goal of both sides can be seen as minimizing the risk of conflicts later on:

> "[…] our clan is very easy going. We don't really look for very skilled people, we just look for nice people. For example, last time we actually rejected an application, not because he was crap, he was really good, because we actually have some testers that are appointed to test people and see, but because he was a bit rude, a bit … we didn't like how he was chatting, the way he was saying things. Because unfortunately in the Internet you can't see the person, you have to judge the person the way he writes even though you know that it is a bit…that you shouldn't, but that is the only way to do it. And so we just said no, we don't want you in our clan. You are a good player, but we don't really fancy your attitude. He was a bit upset, but then he said ok, fair enough (laughs). So we are not really choosy, but we want nice people so that we can chat and, you know."
> (Interviewee F)

Only a certain amount of value-building takes place within specific events such as the recruitment of new members, and even then the participants might not discuss values and goals explicitly. Rather, the process of value-building often goes unnoticed in the background of everyday social interaction. Indeed, if only a few of the interviewees were particularly aware of their communities' values, even fewer could tell me how they had ended up with them. In a typical multiplayer community, moments of explicit value-talk seem to be relatively rare. There are exceptions to this, such as young communities in urgent need of establishing common ground, or established communities encountering possibly devastating conflicts.

In both communities I belonged to it was mostly through the everyday discourse that the "atmosphere" of the communities was built. For example, both communities contained some amount of talk promoting sociability and fun. From the moment of recruiting new members to the conversations on the public community channel, social values were being asserted:

> Ageos: I'll go help some random noob[20] in old frontier
> Bouna: cool
> Ageos: I enjoy that:-)
> Spiritdesign: it is cool to help new guys:)
> Bouna: :)

In both of the communities I belonged to, much of the talk that could be interpreted as value-building carried an air of laid-back ease and geniality. Indeed, the basic values of both communities were very similar. Both communities promoted an interpersonal atmosphere where competitiveness was, if not frowned upon, at least not seen as a necessary aspect of the game or the community effort. Instead of playing competitively together, community members were content to spend time together, chatting and exploring the game world. Overall, both communities inclined towards having a relaxed gaming experience with like-minded players, where the community served as a safe haven of sorts against outsiders whose behavior could not always be trusted.

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[20] noob, newbie = new, inexperienced player

Of particular note was the inclusion of talk that could be labeled as self-disclosure. Self-disclosure has been seen to serve as promoting an interpersonal atmosphere in online communities (see e.g. Baym 2000, 152). Through disclosing information concerning personal values and preferences members of multiplayer communities are constantly negotiating the shared base on which the community effort is built. We will return to self-disclosure in more detail in the next section, 6.3, with regard to identity building.

In addition to this kind of implicit value-building, some multiplayer communities go one step further and actually put their goals and values into words. For example, one interviewee's community had held a meeting with the aim of clarifying the community's values and goals. After the meeting the leader of the community turned the outcome into a document that was then published on the community's web-portal. This document included references to both broad values such as friendliness, and specific norms and rules such as instructions on what kind of players to invite into the community, or what kind of behavior within the community could lead to promotion. The motivations for creating such documents are manifold. Communities publish their core values on the net for everyone to see and market them on the game's public forums, for example, with the purpose of reaching as many potential members as possible. A multiplayer community that clearly expresses its basic goals and values is effectively streamlining its recruiting process. Stating outright what the community stands for encourages a certain set of players to join the community while discouraging others. Furthermore, by expressing the goals in words the community members are trying to make sure that all the members of the community acknowledge them, and if they do so this may result in heightened motivation and feeling of community that can help the community achieve its goals. There is some indication that the need for the formal expression of values and goals is more likely the larger the multiplayer community is (Williams et al., 2006).

Not all members of multiplayer communities appreciate the publication of the community's values equally. Some are content at the thought of spending time with other players as long as they behave in a civilized manner, and even shy away from communities with very strict goals. Some players, on the other hand, express a need for clear values and goals within a multiplayer community. To them, the reasons why they wanted to belong to the community in the first place are not always satisfied simply by being together:

> "First I joined a group who were supposed to have fun together. But everyone there was either on vacation or working, like three shifts (laughs). It wasn't that much fun, and then I left and joined a group who were trying to achieve something, and that turned out to be fun after all. In a way that there are a few people who want to concentrate on the certain game and proceed in it, to advance the game situation, to explore the possibilities."
> (Interviewee A)

**Trust**

The benefits of trust when building and maintaining social organizations, as opposed to a lack of trust, are widely appreciated. Like any long-term social aggregates, multiplayer communities need to have a foundation of mutual trust and collaboration if they want to function effectively over a long period of time (see e.g. Holton, 2001). Furthermore, for a feeling of community to develop, there has to be some basic level of trust among community members (Seligman, 2001).

While trust can be instantaneous and general, the kind of trust that develops over time towards one's communication partners is especially important for social networks such as multiplayer communities. In the context of multiplayer communities the kind of trust that develops through frequent and meaningful social interaction is especially relevant. This kind of trust is based on a shared history, and benefits from some kind of anticipation of future interaction as well. It requires the possibility to identify one's interaction partners, something we will come back to in the next section. Caring talk, personal conversations, and story telling are examples of the types of social interaction that can help establish a trusting atmosphere, where self-disclosure and sharing of feelings is encouraged. (Holton, 2001, see also Kollock & Smith, 1996; Galston, 2000.)

The phenomenon of trust runs through many aspects of community life, including the process of negotiating shared values and goals. Trust can be at the same time something that emerges through continuous social interaction as well as something that has an effect on it. For example, achieving an understanding of shared values and goals can increase the experience of trust between community members. On the other hand, to be able to trust the other member's motives might make negotiating values and goals easier.

> "Man, people trust you and they never met you in real life. I can log like three other accounts of other people. They also log mine when they need it. We are one, and less than that is not interesting to me."
> (Interviewee G)

Trust can also be a goal in itself. For example, experiences where fellow players have broken the trust of their gaming partners are evident both in this study (see e.g. sub-section 6.5.1) and in other studies into multiplayer games (see e.g. Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). To be able to trust one's gaming partners can be a major reason behind seeking membership in longer lasting social networks:

> "[…] we pretty much helped the people of our clan, and for example if you knew that a guy belonged to the clan, you didn't have to doubt him anymore. You could play in a relaxed manner and not worry about if you happened to drop a good item or something that you would have to grab it as fast as possible (laughs), rather we could always negotiate about it. And you didn't have to be careful about mean tricks such as these player killers, they can use all kinds of roundabout ways in order to kill you. For example in Diablo two there are these portals through which you can get to safety, to town and back. Well, if there is somewhere a really bad monster, they can

> go an irritate it a bit and lure it just beside the portal, after which they leave the place. And then they wait that some poor bastard comes through the portal and gets of course immediately his ass handed to him by the monster. Well, it was stuff like this that you didn't have to fear about with your clan members."
> (Interviewee O)

Ultimately, the kind of long-term trust that is possible in multiplayer communities enables the members of a community to feel comfortable when sharing their individual insights and concerns.

## 6.3 Who were we all? Questions of identity

This section discusses identities in multiplayer communities. The analysis concentrates particularly on the issue of an individual establishing his or her place within a multiplayer community.

The analysis is divided into three sub-sections. The first sub-section discusses why stable identities are important for multiplayer communities and how social identity emerges. The second sub-section analyses the question of whether face-to-face identities have an effect online, and if they do, what this effect might be. This sub-section also includes discussion of the concept of computer-mediated communication making identity play possible. The third sub-section compares the viewpoint of identities being actively built versus the viewpoint of identities emerging gradually through long-term social interaction.

The discussion within this section concentrates mainly on those instances of multiplayer community where all or most of the social interaction takes place in a digital realm. Questions of identity can be very different if face-to-face relations are involved, as is often the case in the context of multiplayer games. For example, people interested in such questions might be interested in the management of impressions formed online among players who later on meet face-to-face (Jacobson, 1999) or differences in patterns of self-disclosure as opposed to purely computer-mediated communities (Blanchard & Horan, 1998).

Both the interview data in this study and results from other studies suggest that a majority of players of multiplayer games have been face-to-face with at least one of their gaming partners. For example, the vast majority (70 per cent) of players report playing MMO-games with friends that they know in real life. Only about 20 per cent of MMOG players are not playing with someone they know in "real life" on a regular basis. (Yee, 2006a.)

However, especially in large multiplayer communities that operate across national and cultural borders it is likely that most of the relationships one has within the game's framework and within one's multiplayer community are established and maintained solely through computer-mediated communication. Issues concerning establishing identities in computer-mediated relationships

were also the ones that were most strongly represented in the data of this study, which is why the following discussion concentrates mostly on them.

### 6.3.1 Identity in multiplayer games

Identity is a broad subject, and one that has been approached from many angles both within and outside of studies into computer-mediated communication. It is beyond the scope of this section, or indeed this whole study to discuss the myriad aspects of identity. In this study, identity is discussed from the point of view of *social identity* as presented by Richard Jenkins (1996)[21]. In his book entitled "Social Identity", Jenkins offers a wide discussion of sociological theories of identity. Taking into account the work of Mead, Goffman, and Barth, among others, he proposes a view of identity as both individual and collective. According to this point of view social identity is, "*…our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)*" (ibid: 5)[22]. From now on I will use the terms *social identity* and *identity* interchangeably, meaning the former.

This view emphasizes that identity should be seen as a process, negotiable just like meanings are. Since we form our understandings of ourselves and of others in interaction with other people, communication becomes a key aspect of understanding social identity. Thus, the kind of identity discussed within the confines of this sub-section should be seen similar to impression management and our perceptions of ourselves and of others.

As we have seen in the discussion of the basic ingredients of community in section 5.1, a community requires long-term social interaction to develop. Furthermore, the kind of long-term cohesion that communities require calls for a level of stability that is not possible in totally anonymous environments (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, it is an important ingredient in building a feeling of community to be able to rely on the social identity of other members - in effect to be able to trust that they share either mutual beliefs or goals, or both (Beniger, 1987). The development of social identity is, then, one of the key components of the community process.

Many of the meanings of identity are left out of the discussion in this sub-section. Amongst them is the self-determination of identity and the idea of individuals using community as, "…a *referent of their identity*" (Cohen, 1989: 118). The issue of the "group being in the individual" (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle & Otten, 2005: 100) runs as an undercurrent throughout the whole study, surfacing whenever issues such as cohesion and a feeling of community are discussed.

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21 The term "social identity" has also been used in the sense of identification with social and cultural groups instead of the meaning presented here.

22 Social identity as proposed by Jenkins (1996) should not be understood as a synonym for the Social Identity Theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979), which addresses especially how members of particular groups share attributes and how these attributes provide a source of identity common to all members.

A social identity can be seen as a practical accomplishment, a process that emerges through continuing social interaction. This process is characterized by a dialectical interplay of internal and external definition, where an individual and the surrounding social group are constantly negotiating their limits through similarities and differences. (Jenkins, 1996: 24–25.) Establishing a social identity, then, is one of the key processes of the community process. In the next paragraphs we shall look at some of the ways in which identity can affect social interaction within multiplayer communities.

We have already concluded that a long-term social aggregate such as a community cannot exist without some stability of identities. Furthermore, an individual who wants to be accepted as a member of a community should have an identity that distinguishes him or her from the general mass (Cohen, 1989: 118; Donath, 1999: 31). For example, upon entering a multiplayer community a new member is often quite "faceless", just another pseudonym among possibly dozens of others. Other members will usually act kindly towards a new member, but their kindness can be rather scripted and impassive. They might, for example, always greet the new member but only rarely initiate interaction with him or her. Only through time can the other members form any conception of who this person is, and this depends on he or she engaging actively in the social interaction of the community.

Especially with regards to the discourse on anonymity in computer-mediated communication, it is relevant to ask how "solid" an identity a typical member of a multiplayer community should have in order to be counted as a member. That is, does an appearance in the form of an avatar and a pseudonym make an identity? Or is it enough to just carry a virtual badge saying that one belongs to a certain community, without actually participating in its operation in any way? (This question relates to that of membership that was discussed in sub-section 6.1.3.)

It is often possible to be associated with a multiplayer community without actually committing oneself to it on any very profound level. As we shall see later on in sub-section 6.4.2 on the inner circle of active and influential members, there are usually differing levels of participation and commitment in multiplayer communities. Despite this variance it is clear that there is very little practical gain from a multiplayer community unless one invests some time and effort into it (on the various motivations for joining multiplayer communities, see sub-section 6.1.3).

Hypothetically, one could gain some status or even resources without contributing much oneself. For example, sometimes just having the name of a famous multiplayer community attached to one's own name can be desirable as a means of gaining prestige among other players. Still, as the multiplayer gaming context typically favors cooperation, and since multiplayer communities typically include cooperative aspects in their activities, one can say that the best results out of a multiplayer community usually come to those who invest the most in it. Conversely, in order to gain the benefits from belonging to a multiplayer community one cannot remain a total outsider.

An example of the need for a certain stability of identities is provided by Wellman and Gulia (1999: 343) who refer to a Master's thesis by Meyer (1989) concerning the social organization of the computer underground. Within this particular context, members of social networks, be they computer hackers or crackers, must sometimes protect their personal identities in order to prevent the authorities from tracing them. Despite this, there is reluctance to change the pseudonym too often, as this leads to losing the status associated with the older one. Without that status, it is difficult to be recognized as a community member.

Recognizable identities affect the flow of social interaction in many ways. On a basic level, established social identities can be seen as motivating social interaction between members of a community. Put simply, we are more likely to help those who are known to us, and with whom we have a lasting relationship (Donath, 1999). Recognizable identities can also help in evaluating the reliability of information coming from other members of the community (Beniger, 1987).

Furthermore, especially in cases where members of a community do not have first-hand experience of each other, they can make choices concerning interaction based on the reputation of the individuals in question. Forming these reputations is made possible by the existence of stable identities (Donath, 1999).

Continuity and sustainability, as opposed to anarchy and chaos, call for people to care what others think about them. In a community concern for one's reputation sets limits to one's behavior (Goffman, 1959). The concept of reputation is also relevant for multiplayer games in general. Typically, multiplayer games constitute a context where reputation can be much more valuable than in-game possessions or even an individual's playing skills and knowledge. Quoting Jakobsson and Taylor (2003: 86), "*At the high-end game many of the most significant accomplishments simply cannot be done alone* […] *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.*" A bad reputation or no reputation at all can affect negatively an individual's access to the possible benefits of social networks within a multiplayer game.

Lastly, lack of reliable identification can lead to negative outcomes as well as positive ones. For example, in a popular FPS-game called Counter Strike it is possible to play against other players on public servers that are open to everyone. While playing on a public server, it is not necessary to keep the same pseudonym, but one can change one's name as often as one wants. When one logs in for the first time, the program offers a default name of "Player 1". Not changing away from this anonymous name is often interpreted as meaning one of two things. The player might be a new player and not know how to change the name. Or the player is an experienced player who has come to practice on the public servers, not wanting to reveal his or her established identity among the gaming community. Interestingly enough, both interpretations can lead to negative remarks from other players, and to questions regarding the "real" identity of the player (see e.g. Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2002.) Even in a

context where anonymity is the norm, some degree of recognizability is desirable and expected.

In conclusion, a stable social identity is a major motivator for communication within the context of multiplayer games. Establishing an identity and caring for one's reputation are important both in the grand scope of multiplayer games and in the circle of a specific multiplayer community.

**Establishing identities in multiplayer games**

A player's social identity in multiplayer games is practically never permanent, but rather it is constantly renewed and negotiated in interaction with other players. This process of re-shaping is in some ways particularly visible in the contexts of CMC, where the factors that traditionally support the emergence of identities, such as social structure and class, ethnicity, gender, appearance, and possessions are not as readily available or appear to be more fluid than in face-to-face situations (on factors constituting our identities face-to-face, see e.g. Goffman, 1959).

In the context of multiplayer communities, there are further factors that impose special pressure on establishing stable identities. In many multiplayer games such as MMOGs it is easy to take on new appearances and names. In a computer-mediated environment where name and appearance are often the first and only outward signs we associate with a certain identity, this can be confusing. Such confusion can be somewhat mitigated both by technical solutions and through social interaction. For example, there may be a notification in a player account's log-in message that lists all the pseudonyms that are associated with that player account. It is also typical for community members to discuss the players "behind" the game characters when necessary:

> Orbinol: hmm, I think I log with Leelou
> […]
> Nisharak: Ah, so you are alt[23] for Leelou and Mortified?!

The array of pseudonyms in a particular multiplayer community can be further complicated by the fact that it is possible for two or more players to share a player account, and thus appear online as the same person. Arrangements like this can cause extra need for clarification, and can be confusing for other members of a community, especially if both the players behind one player account are rather central to the community. For example, in Beta there was a romantic couple using one account, though different characters within it. While such behavior did not cause serious problems, it was still seen as a possible source of misunderstandings. Thus, when the couple finally got another player

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[23] "alt" is an acronym for an "alternative character", as opposed to "main" that is used to refer to a "main character". Usually players of a MMOG will have one "main" character with which they play most frequently, and one or more "alts", even though the status of these characters can change over time according to the character with which the player plays the most.

account it was specifically mentioned in the community news-channel that announced the promotion of a few members to the rank of general within the community:

> "On a special note… Ray, Lorian's boyfriend was sharing an account with Lorian, has now gotten his own account and will be given this title [General] as well."
> (An excerpt from the community news-channel)

It is also typical especially of large multiplayer communities to have a heavy member turnover and this is further emphasized by the rather hectic lifespan of typical multiplayer communities. While there is no reason why a multiplayer community could not stay alive for several years, it is more common that they exist only for some months, flickering out of existence or transforming into a new form in a continuous dance of social networking. These two factors together mean that it is less likely that a multiplayer community's membership will stay the same for a long time than that it will be in constant change. Even those who stay with a community from its birth until its death are often confronted with other members coming and going. All this movement and fluidity enhances the importance of creating a distinguishable social identity within a community.

Lastly, in a typical computer-mediated environment it is deceptively easy to sink into the background and not participate actively. Even in those multiplayer games that could be described as virtual worlds and consequently allow for some level of presence just by "being there" as a virtual/physical representation of the self (of the concept of presence in computer-mediated settings, see Lombard & Ditton, 1997), to be included in the social reality of a community one has to participate actively in its social interaction.

In the data sets of this study two central themes or grand discourses of establishing identities emerged. The first concerns the question of whether and if so what kind of an effect offline identity has on online identity. This theme is discussed in sub-section 6.3.2. The second theme concentrates around the question of whether an identity can be actively built, or if it is rather something that emerges gradually through long-term social interaction between community members. This theme is discussed in sub-section 6.3.3.

### 6.3.2 Playful identities?

Players of multiplayer games are usually aware of the fact that their social identities within their communities can be influenced by both off-line and online factors. Part of this awareness comes from the rich discourse on identity deception in computer-mediated environments, which has led to a common norm of not automatically trusting what other people tell about themselves. Mostly, though, questions of the relation of off-line versus online identities occur on a less dramatic level, where players bring both off-line references into the virtual world and build an image of themselves purely as virtual beings, using playing style and in-game experience and capacity as their tools.

How, then, does the division into off-line and online show in identity building in multiplayer games? Later on in this sub-section we will discuss thoughts on both bringing off-line references into the online world, and building an identity without such references. First, though, we shall look at one of the most compelling aspects of this discourse - the notion of identity deception and playful identities.

**Can an honest man make a liar?**

Questions regarding the construction of the "self" seem to be one of the key notions in the analysis of the present-day human condition. As Filiciak notes, "*Digital media, video games included, enable us - for the first time in history on such a scale – to manipulate our "selves" and to multiply them indefinitely*" (2006: 88). The concept of CMC enabling identity play surfaced early on in comments concerning virtual realities (e.g. Turkle, 1995; Bromberg, 1996).

By the mid 1990s discussion of identity play had become a staple feature of many analyses of *cyberspace*, as the realm of computer-mediated communication revolving around the Internet was often called at the time. The basic idea was that cyberspace enabled one to deconstruct the entire notion of authenticity, particularly with regard to embodiment. With the limitations of our bodies having less effect on us, our established identities might become more fluid, and we might be better able to control the image we give of ourselves to others. This idea of identity as performance is known as *cyberlibertarianism* (see e.g. Slater, 2002).

Discourse on identity as free performance was especially vibrant within the sphere of public discourse on cyberspace, for example in magazines and newspapers. Combined with the apparently anonymous nature of virtual worlds the evident freedom of self-presentation was seen to encourage people to experiment with their identities up to the point that it became one of their primary preoccupations.

The discourse on identity play lives on in the context of multiplayer computer games. Of all the contexts of computer-mediated communication, online multiplayer gaming seems to offer particularly many chances for identity play and experimentation, such as gender and age play. As Hand and Moore (2006: 177) put it, "*Online gaming can be seen as one activity whereby interaction with others through digital technology offers the opportunity to rewrite one's own identity outside of traditional constraints.*" This is because the context of gaming is by default a playful one, where the restrictions of everyday life are replaced with ones of the game-reality.

Another idea within the discourse on identity play is the notion that even though we might seem to leave our bodies when we operate in the Net, in reality everything that happens in a "virtual world" is based on, and must return to, the physical world (Stone, 1991: 19). This means that more often than not we bring our gender, socioeconomic status, culture, and other similar factors into the online world. In fact, it might be simply wishful thinking that our physical markers and other traits would cease to matter when we are

engaged in computer-mediated communication (see e.g. O'Brien, 1999). It might just be that these factors are not as obviously present as the computer-mediated presentation of self we first encounter when meeting someone online.

Since the introduction of the notion of identity play in the Internet, views on the matter have become much more diverse and it has become clear that most people do actually retain and represent their "original" identity even in online contexts (Schiano & White, 1998: 355–356). In addition, research has shown that even when given full reign on their identity construction as performance, people often end up reinforcing the most conventional offline gender aspirations (see e.g. Slater, 2002: 538). Nevertheless, the data sets of this study revealed that the question of playful identities is still rather important to players of multiplayer games.

In the data sets of this study, two major competing interpretations were evident concerning the possibility of engaging in identity play. One interpretation proposes that contemporary communication technologies offer a wide range of possibilities for identity play. The other interpretation claims that despite the apparent possibilities for identity play, a person cannot continuously fake who he or she "really is":

> "As I told you, a person through this media can actually be someone else. Not only can a man be a woman, but he can actually act that he is a different kind of guy. He can act that he is really kind when maybe in real life he is not. Or the opposite, maybe in real life he is really shy, so he tends to, how do you say, to be more rude and hard in the Internet because this is the only way he can be that. Because maybe he can't be that in real life. So you can't basically ever know people like that. Okay, after a lot of time you can also recognize, like when you read something you almost, especially after some years, recognize who he is. Because they tend to, even if they don't want, always put a bit of themselves in their writing. Especially when they reply about some problems or some topics. And you tend to almost know what they are going to say. […] So you can actually get to know, I don't know if you get to know the person, but you actually get to know the way this person uses this media. The way this person relates to other people within this media. You will never know really how this person is when he is around people in real life, but you will know how they are in the Internet."
> (Interviewee F)

> Interviewee J: "We have had horrible wars on the message boards exactly about whether such a person is dishonest in reality that is dishonest in the game and so forth, but…"
> Interviewer: "Or is that person role-playing or..."
> Interviewee J: "Yeah, but for some reason it does somehow always reflect the character of that person in my opinion."

The idea that some kind of an original identity seeps through when engaged in long-term social interaction could even be considered to go so far as to suggest that the anonymity of the net, in addition to allowing someone to play a character, constitutes a mask that has the effect of, "*bringing out what you're like deep down inside*" (quotation taken from an informant in Bromberg, 1996: 148).

While many online multiplayer games such as MMOGs and MUDs certainly offer a fertile ground for playful identity-construction, players do not necessarily use this opportunity. For example, although statistics vary, it seems that all-in-all long-time gender bending[24] is not very popular, even in games where it has been made easy, and where the role-playing elements encourage it. On average, some 14–20% of players of MMOGs report having played characters of the opposite sex (McKenna & Lee, 1996; Kolo & Baur, 2004). The amount of people who continuously play with a character of the opposite sex is likely to be lower. According to Yee's (2001) large statistical analysis of the players of the MMOG Everquest, only around 13 percent of players reported that their main character (the character they play, and one could argue, identify with the most) was of the opposite sex. All in all, there is evidence that people are generally "being themselves" even when confronted with ample opportunities for identity play (Schiano & White, 1998).

Identity play such as gender and age play represent a fairly radical take on the question of off-line identities versus online ones. Usually, during the day-to-day social interaction that takes place within multiplayer communities there is no reason to doubt the validity of people's off-line references. It is more typical that the link between off-line and online identities is a more mundane one, as is shown in the following paragraphs.

**Off-line references**

The image that players build of themselves in the context of multiplayer communities is often connected to their off-line persona at least on some levels. For example, one facet of the socially oriented talk among community members is self-disclosure of factors from outside the game world. People might share personal information such as their names, their countries of origin, their marital status and other information that is, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the gaming experience or even to the functioning of the multiplayer community:

> [Team] Avenger: rl?
> [Team] Groo: I heard that you're German, but I meant Sardaukaar
> [Team] Groo: I'm from Finland
> [Team] Groo: Finland
> [Team] Avenger: cool
> [Team] Avenger: :)
> [Team] Sardaman: I'm Romanian
> [Team] Avenger: geilo
> [Team]Groo: that's cool, true multicultural gaming;)
> [Team] Sardaman: hehehe

---

[24] When talking about gender bending, one should distinguish between actually trying to build the identity of someone of the opposite sex or just choosing a game character whose description or graphical appearance are different from one's own gender. This is because in most multiplayer games the gender of the character does not actually make any difference in the gameplay despite the differences in textual description or graphical representation. Thus, simply choosing a female avatar should not be taken to mean that a male player is gender bending.

This type of self-disclosure is not practiced equally by all players, and it is not universally accepted, either. Many players feel that they do not need to know personal details of other players' lives, but instead they want to concentrate on the game:

> "Well, I'm not, I mean I 'm really bad at ever putting any matters from outside the game onto the message boards, because I don't in a way feel the need to, open up to those gaming friends about such things. But you can notice that there are such people who have the need to say that now such and such things are going on in life. And naturally then when, for example, on our message board we just had this that a guy had gotten twins, and of course we all congratulated him and so forth. But for me it is not so important."
> (Interviewee M)

For some players, though, self-disclosure concerning personal matters beyond the game world can be a liberating experience. Talking about events outside the game can become a unifying factor between members, and many players feel that such self-disclosure contributes greatly to the social cohesion of the community:

> "It's definitely important. Of course it varies according to the game and according to what kind of a group you have going, but for example for my current enthusiasm for gaming it is important that you can experience that there are indeed friends there with whom you are doing stuff together."
> (Interviewee H)

The amount of this type of talk varies from game to game and from community to community. For example, factors such as the tempo of the game can have an effect on the time available for it. In addition, some players feel that in order to engage in talk concerning off-line matters, a certain level of shared understanding is required:

> "Well, it depends on the community, for example thinking conversely, this fast-paced Half Life doesn't have much except on the IRC-channel there might be, but the topics are usually pretty light. It also depends on the age of the people, if you are talking about women, girlfriends or cooking with some 18-year-olds, it's probable that they have the most experience about cooking (laughs). And then when you go, well, in Diablo it of course depends on whom you meet, you might meet someone with experience, but especially in BatMud you can talk about everything from a to z."
> (Interviewee A)

In those contexts of CMC that are fundamentally anonymous, one can sometimes see people disclosing much more personal information than would be expected. Such behavior is based on the belief that one's conversation partners will most likely never be met afterwards, and especially not face-to-face.

> ”Let’s say that some of them I got to know like, well, of course it was always dependent on what they said and what it said on their home pages. Some I got to know so that I knew about their problems at home and such. Perhaps it was also a bit like, there was there one American woman, she could tell you all kinds of stuff, because she must have known that if the other person is from Finland, it is just the same what she says about her husband or children. Because it will never come back at her (laughs).”
> (Interviewee C.)

This occurrence of communication partners disclosing highly personal information, liberated by the notion of not meeting the other party afterwards is also referred to as the “shipboard syndrome”. It has been observed in various contexts of CMC, including online multiplayer games such as MUDs (Curtis, 1997). It is unclear, though, how usual this kind of behavior is in the context of established multiplayer communities. Despite the apparent anonymity of the context, the task-related elements of a community and the emergence of stabile identities may work to counterbalance such tendencies. Indeed, since the members of a community expect to be in contact with each other on a daily basis in the future, they might be discouraged from giving too much away to the other participants.

Generally, there is not much talk concerning off-line issues in the context of multiplayer games. This was apparent both in the interview data and the observation data. Naturally there can be exceptions, such as when members of a multiplayer community end up spending hours talking to one another without playing their chosen game or games. Still, even within the context of multiplayer communities the instances when off-line matters are brought to the front are sporadic and fleeting, like brief flashes in the midst of a much larger body of general task-related communication and various scripted communication events, such as players greeting others.

Even with a minimal amount of self-disclosure concerning off-line matters, members of multiplayer communities are often able to form images and perceptions of each other’s face-to-face characteristics. A good example of this tendency comes from an interview I had with one of the players who belonged to the same communities as me. At the time of the interview, I had already been a member for some months, and I had identified those members of the community that mostly made up its inner core. I had also created images of them in my head from the information available. They had distinct personalities to me, and in many ways they even felt close and personal - as if I knew them well. This idea took on a new light during the interview when we compared our mental images of the more active members. Firstly, we had partially differing information, based on our playing at different times and experiencing different events. Secondly, our information was partly contradictory. For example, we located some members in different countries, even in different continents. We had also made significantly differing interpretations of the actions of these members:

> Interviewee B: ”Well, I don’t know. Of course you sort of remember where those people are from whom you are mostly in contact with. For example Leya is a mother of two and so forth, she is apparently fat and calls herself a bitch.”
> Interviewer: “And lives in the U.S.?”
> Interviewee B: ”No, she’s Swedish.”
> Interviewer: ”Oh, well I had somehow placed her all the time in the U.S.”
> Interviewee B: ”Yeah, you can get such an impression of her, I also every once in a while think about who she is.”
> Interviewer: ”And at least her hubby, like husband or boyfriend is called Gewhiz. Or at least they are together.”
> Interviewee B: ”Yeah, I don’t know so much about Gewhiz, can’t tell.”
> Interviewer: ”I think it was at some point in the phase when they were promoting generals in [Beta] when you could read about this [in the community news].”
> Interviewee B: ”Ok, I don’t remember that, but about others, well Colitris is from Ohio, and well, I can’t remember what he’s doing. Can’t think of his profession right now. And then I think that Hydro and Ilseter were a couple, or was it Hydro and Lamethas.”

What was important in the end, though, was not whether I agreed with the interviewee on the off-line characteristics of these members, but that we both recognized their centrality and activity within the community. Had they not been so central to the activities of the community, we would probably not have needed to construct a mental image of them.

This tendency to form mental images of significant others even when presented with a limited amount of information is explained by the hyperpersonal perspective, and will be further discussed in sub-section 6.3.3 in conjunction with tactical identity building.

**Online identity formation**

It is possible to establish social identity within a multiplayer community without leaning too heavily on the off-line characteristics of members. This can be done by engaging in long-term social interaction within the game’s sphere of action. For example, from the community’s point of view it is often important that members share knowledge of the playing skills of other members. Also their commitment, and how they choose to implement their skills and knowledge for the community’s benefit are important pieces of information that can operate as a building block of social identity.

An individual also contributes to the emergence of social identity with potentially every choice they make ingame, such as choosing a pseudonym. Multiplayer games typically employ pseudonyms instead of players’ offline names, which can be seen as contributing to the concept of play taking place outside ordinary life and often in a fantasy-like setting.

Especially those players who are more experienced often have an intricate knowledge of the various connotations carried by different types of names. For example, the name of my main character in Anarchy Online was “Groo”. I chose this name partly because of its neutral tone, partly because it had nice connections to other popular culture phenomena such as TV-series and comics.

Furthermore, the character bearing the name was a gigantic, muscular neuter with a very small head, looking very much like a stereotypical cave-man whose vocabulary would have consisted of one-syllable words only. In many ways Groo, while being humorous especially in conjunction with the appearance of my avatar, was a serious name. Had I chosen a name like "LoverBoXXX" or "Missl33t", I might have been treated altogether differently from the start. Names that make extensive use of so-called Leetspeak (which, in Leetspeak comes out as 13375p34k) or include blatant sexual references are often interpreted as belonging to young, inexperienced or otherwise immature people. Knowing now the maturity of the community I was recruited into and the absence of Leetspeak in general, I would probably have experienced many more difficulties getting into the community with the latter kind of name.

In addition to the name of the character, one of the first messages that contributes to the emergence of social identity is provided by the appearance of the avatar. As Taylor (2003a: 29) argues, "[…] *these virtual bodies themselves explicitly become vehicles for building, conveying, stabilizing, and often challenging, identity and community*". Multiplayer games vary greatly in the scope and style of avatars that are available to players. Especially within graphically rich multiplayer games, though, general human-shaped (or at least humanoid-shaped) avatars are very common.

Many multiplayer games such as MMOGs display some sort of visual or textual information about characters' level of experience and capabilities ingame (for an example, see Figure 4). For example, the avatar of a player might have a large sword and heavy armor, telling other players that they are dealing with someone capable of fighting. In addition, the textures and descriptions used in multiplayer games are often subtle, with hints that only seasoned players can understand. In the previous example, the sword of the character might be curved, with a blue aura surrounding the blade. With this information alone an experienced player could tell much about the experience-level of the character in question, including its character class, probable skills, relative power in the game-world, and competence in various tasks within the game.

In multiplayer games such as Anarchy Online, where players typically organize themselves into long-lasting multiplayer communities, the game is often programmed to include further individualized visual and textual information on a character. For example, there might be a sign or signs hovering over a player's avatar with their name and information about their alignment within the game world. Typically these signs also present the name of the multiplayer community to which the avatar is connected. It may happen that players join temporarily with others in order to gain such a label for their avatar, without having any intention of actually forming a longer lasting multiplayer community. In general, though, even players who do not belong to multiplayer communities learn quickly to distinguish the larger and more prominent or "famous" communities from smaller and insignificant ones.

The various visual cues linked to a player's character can be seen as having three central functions. First, they can be used as a means of self-expression. Second, they can be used to strengthen cohesion, for example when

community members are asked to wear similar clothing for a specific meeting. Third, they can be used to communicate one's status to other players.

Despite their possible richness, these cues, much like their nonverbal equivalents in the physical world, often leave things open to interpretation. Because of this vagueness, verbal self-disclosure of one's game-related abilities is often required:

> [Team] Groo: my heals [healing spells] are not that powerful yet, mainly because I haven't been to town for awhile
>
> [Team] Demonseer: never seen this part of the city
> [Team] Methkristal: I'm lagging[25] like a little girl
> [Team] Groo: you also look like one;P [Methkristal was playing a female character.]
> [Team] Rhodimus: wait I gotta give someone sumpin [something] real quick

As an interesting sidenote, the level of self-disclosure of off-line matters in the observation data was relatively small. Rather, most of the information people shared had to do with in-game matters. It is a telling feature of the multiplayer computer game context that even in communities where social aspects are


FIGURE 4 Avatars in Anarchy Online

25 lag = delays experienced in gameplay

valued, players appreciate in-game information for its practical uses. Knowing other players' strengths and weaknesses makes organizing gameplay easier and helps to overcome problems encountered in the game.

In the context of multiplayer communities, actual deeds are still more important than verbal assertions. A player might tell everyone that he or she is a wonderful team player, but only time and practice will tell other community members if that is really the case and whether or not this person can be trusted. For example, as we shall see in sub-section 6.4.2, it is often the case that certain members of a community constitute an inner circle - a devoted group of individuals within the larger community. A position in such an inner circle can be achieved without much self-disclosure about one's off-line characteristics, but cannot be achieved without concrete participation in the operation of the community.

Put simply, multiplayer communities typically include gaming together as a significant aspect of their community life. Such emphasis on action reinforces the practical aspects of establishing an identity. After the requirements of continuity and recognizability are fulfilled, it is less important whether social identities within a multiplayer community are based on physical reality or not. For example, for the operation of a given multiplayer community it is usually less relevant to know a member's gender, age, ethnical background, or eye-color than it is to know if they can be trusted when the need arises, if they are committed and if they fit in with the overall value-environment of the community:

> "[…] ok, you don't know straight away the age. You don't usually ask it. For example I don't have, I'm chatting with a friend, I usually don't ask how old are you, no? Mm… because I suppose since I have been using the Internet I actually put almost everybody in the same age. That as long as you can actually chat with this person, you chat with this person, you don't care how old this person is, where he comes from, stuff like that. But sometimes you can really read that of the person. Sometimes they write in a way that you know you used to write like ten years ago (laughs) at that age. But in our clan there are people who are even minors, and some people who are thirty. But as long as they are nice people we aren't prejudiced."
> (Interviewee F)

In conclusion, even though the discourse of identity play lives strong in the context of multiplayer computer games, at least in the data of this study it was not overly common. In the context of long-term social networks, some of which evolve into communities, this idea of playing with fluid identities has to be balanced with the notion of more stable identities. A community simply could not exist and function if it consisted of totally anonymous individuals with no sense of history and no glimpse of the future, and who could not reliably differentiate one member from the others.

At the same time, the social identity required by a community does not need to conform to our traditional ideals and thoughts about identity that are essentially linked to our physical traits, i.e. to a face-to-face self. Rather, in the context of multiplayer communities social identity is constructed of many

pieces: what people know about each others' off-line identities, what official role (if any) they play within the community, and how they behave in the community and in the game. Of these, the knowledge of face-to-face identities is usually the least important but knowledge of the other two much more important, as they have a direct influence on the operation of the community.

### 6.3.3 Building an identity vs. an identity emerging

Running parallel with the question of what kind of relation offline and online identities might have with one another is the question of how consciously and tactically one can approach identity formation in the context of computer-mediated communication. In many ways, when talking about building a (social) identity I am talking about issues of impression management, also known as self-presentation. Impression management is a goal-directed activity of controlling information, for example by structuring one's behavior in order to influence the impressions formed by an audience (Goffman, 1959; see also Schlenker, 2003: 492). Impression management can take many forms, ranging from the way we walk to the way we shake hands. Impression management can be seen as an intentional activity. This means that our behavior is goal directed and organized by its purpose, even if unconsciously. (Schlenker, 2003.)

One of the basic ideas behind impression management in face-to-face situations is that verbal self-reports can be managed more easily than nonverbal behavior. Perhaps stemming from this has come the notion that it is easier to control other people's perceptions of oneself online. It may be thought that in a computer-mediated context it is more difficult to catch involuntary messages, especially those that are transmitted by nonverbal means (see e.g. Filiciak, 2006: 92). Adopting the terms of Erwing Goffman (1959), it seems to be that computer-mediated communication accentuates the expression *given* at the expense of the expression *given off*. This discrepancy can mean that in computer-mediated contexts people are forced to rely more on those messages that are voluntary, and thus more easily manipulated, when forming impressions of others.

#### Tactical approach to building an identity

People tend to be interested in the image others have of him or her. People also try to control or affect these images in their daily interactions with others. For example, in face-to-face contexts there are many ways in which a person might seek to affect others' perceptions of him or her. Both verbal and nonverbal communication can be seen as offering many possibilities for tactical impression management.

Similarly, members of multiplayer communities are often aware of the implications of self-disclosure, making disclosing personal information a pointedly tactical choice. This kind of tactical self-disclosure can, for example, aim at enhancing one's status among the community, for example when

members use their off-line traits, such as age, as arguments regarding online questions. Perhaps the most typical time when this kind of behavior takes place is when new members introduce themselves.

When a new member joins a multiplayer community it is customary to expect some form of introduction from him or her. Introducing oneself works as one of the first building blocks upon which other members start to form an idea of the individual. Especially in large multiplayer communities where member turnover is fast and new faces seem to turn up every other day, having a new member join in and *not* introduce themselves can be thought of as detrimental, in that the new member might easily remain anonymous, faceless and thus incorporeal to the other members. On the other hand, the introduction does not have to happen instantaneously, and it does not have to go very deep.

It is also possible to speed up the process of initiation into a community by tactically divulging favorable personal information. An interesting account of such tactical introduction is presented by Jakobsson and Taylor (2003). In their example, one of the researchers conducting participant observation (Jakobsson) was new to the game, while the other researcher (Taylor) had not only experience game-wise, but also an existing social network within the game's social reality. In order to incorporate Jakobsson into the game more quickly, Taylor introduced him to many of her acquaintances there. When introducing Jakobsson she often used the term "RL friend", which stands for "real life friend". According to Jakobsson and Taylor's testimony, this procedure shortened the time it took for other players to feel trust towards the newcomer and welcome him amongst them.

The possibilities for tactical identity building are made wider by a phenomenon known as hyperpersonal relationship development (Walther, 1996). In hyperpersonal CMC, people bypass the usual course of face-to-face relationship development, ending up quickly with a feeling of intimacy and a notion that they truly know their interaction partner. The development of intimacy between partners is accelerated. An integral part of the idea of hyperpersonality is the notion that senders are able to engage in self-presentation to a degree not afforded in face-to-face interaction, i.e. they have better control over the image they convey to others (Walther, 2006).

When seeking to alter others' perceptions of oneself, one can also try to consciously alter those messages that are normally unconscious. For example, people can be aware of the many levels of communication, looking for tell-tale signals that would reveal an individual's "true" nature. Consequently, those individuals who are being scrutinized can try to exploit this very tendency. For example, in face-to-face communication this can be done by consciously altering those nonverbal signals that are usually thought of as occurring unconsciously, enabling the person to guide the impression he or she makes through behavior that others feel is reliably informing (for an example of this, see e.g. Goffman, 1959).

The basic idea of communication occurring on multiple levels works in the context of multiplayer communities, too. Players of multiplayer games are usually acutely aware of the many possibilities for identity play and self-

presentation available and they thus tend to put more trust in other signals than verbal assertions when forming images of others. It is the nature of these other signals that poses problems for their tactical exploitation. It is not that computer-mediated communication does not include nonverbal communication and similar levels of communication that occur "under the surface" of the obvious. True, many of the conventional nonverbal signals utilized in face-to-face impression formation such as posture, eye-contact and tone of voice are usually missing, but in their stead we find other phenomena such as a heightened awareness of chronemics ("How long did she take to type that message, is she listening at all to what I say?") and the range of means of conveying emotion through textual means, among others (Walther, 2006).

What makes these signals problematic as a tool of tactical impression management is that they cannot simply be used to replace face-to-face nonverbal communication. Face-to-face nonverbal communication arises from a strong base which lies on both biological and cultural foundations. For example, our facial expressions of emotion seem to be not only learned but also inherited (for a review of nonverbal communication, see e.g. Knapp & Hall, 2002; Manusov & Patterson, 2006). No matter how extensive our experience of computer-mediated communication is, it cannot parallel our experience of face-to-face communication. Besides, since establishing the meanings of computer-mediated signals might require a long time, they are in many ways much more a matter of case-by-case negotiation than their face-to-face counterparts. For example, simple changes in the program used to contact another person might result in unwanted changes in the chronemics of communication, requiring re-adjustment in something that might already have been established. All of this leads to the thought that altering the tell-tale signals, the unconscious level of computer-mediated communication, is possibly very difficult.

**Identities emerge in long-term interaction**

What the argumentation presented above leads to is that instead of trusting verbal and nonverbal communication in especially those computer-mediated contexts that include a heavy task-related element, such as multiplayer games, people tend to emphasize the long-term behavior of individuals when constructing their image. For example, upon joining a multiplayer community a new member might say that he or she is a very good player. Because almost anyone can say this, it is not considered trustworthy before proven to be true over time. This can be seen, for example, in how roles in multiplayer communities are often earned instead of given, and how even in those situations when they are given, they need to be validated again and again lest one loses them (More on roles in section 6.4).

Manipulating or "faking" such long-term behavior is, from a functional and practical viewpoint, impossible. For example, from the viewpoint of the community process it does not matter whether a member is actually interested in organizing a community activity or not. What matters is whether that person does it or not. In this way, faking long-term behavior within the community is

pointless, *since even if one manages to consciously manipulate one's behavior for a prolonged period of time, it effectively leads to the community fulfilling its functional "needs"*. In effect, one cannot fake a good player by playing well any more than one can fake an effective manager by managing effectively. Attempting to do so ends up effectively becoming what one tries to fake, and thus fulfilling that functional position within the community.

The tendency presented above is widely, if often unconsciously, understood by members of multiplayer communities. Because of this, I claim that it is more relevant to speak of identities emerging than identities being built in the multiplayer community context. The emergence of a social identity is a combination of many aspects, including conscious self-disclosure, participation in community activities, and all the other forms of social interaction that take place within the community's social network and associated social systems.

In conclusion to the themes of impression management and forming perceptions in the multiplayer community context I propose the following: It seems that in multiplayer communities that operate totally or mostly within a CMC setting, a basic image is relatively quick and easy to establish. This is helped by the hyperpersonal tendency of individuals to ignore missing details and replace them with reflections of their own personalities. The process of impression management can even be approached tactically, for example by selective self-disclosure and a careful choice of outward signs such as pseudonyms and graphical representation. Still, these kinds of "quick" images are only good on an initial level of social interaction. What seems to matter more to members of multiplayer communities is the social identity that emerges through time, when players engage in long-term social interaction with one another and begin attributing some kind of reputation and status to each other. Identity built up over time is recognized as being more influential and important, as practically all players of multiplayer games are aware of the potential ease with which one can (at least try to) fake one's identity in CMC contexts. Put simply, players feel that it does not matter if others are fun and kind when off-line, if at the same time they act rudely online. In the end, a person's off-line characteristics and identities are largely irrelevant for the operation of multiplayer communities, whereas game-related knowledge and skills, and commitment to participate in the community effort, usually prove more important:

> Interviewee G: "To be honest, I do not care what/who you are in real life. If you play a jerk here, you will be treated as a jerk by me for sure. If you fit my universe I will love you. Simple like that."
> Interviewer: "Yes, but of course you end up knowing a great deal about the others' lives, especially if you are advising them on their love-life and so forth?"
> Interviewee G: "Look, people in real life are most of the time trained to do something, like saying hello when they see someone. What I want in my community is that you let every shit you learned in real life go and become a happy one here. I am maybe idealistic but who will send love and trust to others if we all do not try that once in our lives? And at some point people come to you with who they really are."

## 6.4 Roles in multiplayer communities

A *role* is one of those key concepts used in studies that approach communication from a symbolic interactionist framework that, despite its prevalence, has remained often vaguely defined (Littlejohn, 1999: 172). Much like concepts such as I, me, and self, the concept of role has perhaps suffered from its seemingly mundane nature. After all, it is used as part of every-day discourse. A typical definition sees roles as "*the part played by a person in a particular social setting, influenced by his or her expectation of what is appropriate*" (Collins English Dictionary, 2000). Whatever the chosen definition, though, the general idea of roles is connected to both repetitive functions within a social setting and the socially negotiated expectations that are used to define whether the role is being adhered to or not. As a side note, with time one's role or roles in a multiplayer community might become a significant element of one's social identity. There are also similarities in the way roles and identities can emerge through long-term social interaction. In this study, the separation between a person's social identity and his or her roles is seen as stemming from the fundamentally functional foundation of how roles are formed - a social identity, then, is a larger construct that can contain roles within it.

There are several different roles evident in multiplayer communities. This section discusses roles within multiplayer communities mainly from two different viewpoints. After briefly analyzing the various types of roles and how they are formed, the first sub-section concentrates on the role of the leader and the processes of leadership. The second sub-section discusses a common phenomenon in larger multiplayer communities, the emergence of an inner circle of influential and usually active members who also often carry out established roles within the community.

### Roles and how they are formed

There is a multitude of roles apparent in the context of multiplayer communities. Some, like the role of a leader, can be found almost universally among different communities operating in different games. Some are game or community specific. Sometimes roles are formally acknowledged, sometimes they are more informal. Similarly, roles are sometimes positional, while sometimes they emerge in time through repeating behavior:

> "[…] indeed, our conversations [about founding a multiplayer community] have always included some kind of talk about roles. Like that you could take care of this and you that and so forth. That it is, at least I have found it interesting to see how everybody finds their own place there, in a way, and socializes with the group. In a way it confirms that everyone is important here. […] Of course there is also the question about who is what kind of a person, because that then, like you have a personal role or a role that is close to your personality."
> (Interviewee H)

Table 6 presents an example of the types of roles that can be found in multiplayer communities, as evident both in the interviews and the participant observation data. These roles could be roughly divided into two categories according to whether they could be seen as *official*, that is established and positional, or *unofficial*, that is emergent (examples of such traditional categorization can be found early on in the literature on groups, see e.g. Benne & Sheats, 1948). In reality, such clear-cut divisions of roles are difficult to make as various types of roles often become mixed and are not easily distinguished from one another. For example, while unofficial roles more often emerge through interaction, this does not mean that official roles in multiplayer communities never develop in this way. They, too, have to be realized through long-term interaction, making them often effectively "emergent".

Not all multiplayer communities need official roles. Some communities even shy away from them, trying to remain as unstructured as possible. Generally, there are at least two factors that are connected to the pressure of official roles in a multiplayer community. First, those communities with clear task-related goals and/or competitive elements can benefit from assigning certain functions to certain people in order to ensure that they get done. Second, when a community grows in size past a certain point it might become impractical to leave all important tasks in the hands of only one or two members. A large multiplayer community might therefore have several people handling the recruiting of new members, for example.

Basically, there are two ways in which an individual can be assigned a role. First, a role can be given to someone when there is already known to be a certain position in a multiplayer community and a member is chosen to fill it. Second, a role can emerge through long-term social interaction, for example when one member builds up specialized knowledge of the game and becomes a commonly used source of information whenever other members want to know something about that topic or new members need to be educated in it. There are also many, often seemingly arbitrary factors outside the scope of the social reality of the multiplayer community that might have an effect on roles.

TABLE 6 Roles in multiplayer communities as evident in the data

| **Official roles** | **Unofficial roles** |
|---|---|
| Leader | Social hub |
| Task-specific leader | Teacher, Walking knowledge base |
| Recruiter | Peacemaker |
| Organizer (match, F2F meetings, etc.) | Helper |
| Web-page designer/upkeeper | Funny guy |
| Tactician | Irritating provoker / Devil's advocate |
| Rank and file | Enthusiast |

Only official roles can be positional, given out to members of a community. An official role is granted by some or all of the other members of the community. Usually this means that the role is given by someone in a leading position, but the community might also vote on such issues. Multiplayer games like Anarchy Online often include structures that govern how certain rights can be given out in the multiplayer communities that operate within them. For example, every community within such a game might be required to have at least one member with the right to recruit new members, and only this member can then give the same right to other members. These kinds of structures are dictated by the game, making them very difficult to abandon should the community wish to do so.

Because of their nature, official roles can be given out even to those members who have no significant history in the multiplayer community. For example, the community leader's relative or face-to-face friend might be chosen by the leader when he or she deals out specific roles within the community. An official role can also be emergent, for example when a long-time member earns the right to recruit new members into the community.

Roles can also emerge in the course of time, built up through social interaction much like social identity. This holds true especially for unofficial roles, but also official roles might be based on long-term knowledge of an individual member's capabilities and commitment. Emergent roles can build up relatively slowly, but once they are established they might be even more influential than the official roles that are given out. The reasons for this are similar to those discussed in association with social identity emerging, where it was concluded that long-term social interaction is generally considered more trustworthy than verbal assertions alone, for example.

The process of establishing a role can share similarities with social identity emerging that we discussed in the previous section. Such roles are difficult or even impossible to manipulate or "fake". For example, if a member of a multiplayer community earns a specific role because of his or her good performance in the game, the other community members can be relatively sure that that person is, indeed, a good player:

> "For example, I was at one point playing in one of the top clans of Finland. And this clan of my friend, this one where I am playing at the moment, well he gives me sometimes like special missions in the group."
> (Interviewee N)

> Interviewee A: "And then we have such roles and operations models that, well, they depend of course on what phase the clan is in, but like who leads the group, who gives commands, who decides on the strategy and so forth. It is like when the game's on, people easily slip into those roles where they have previously felt comfortable."
> Interviewer: "Are such operations models usually expressed publicly or are they rather unwritten?"
> Interviewee A: "They are unwritten. They have in a way been developed in the course of time, or then some people take them over. That means that they have

> noticed in some game that they are good in a role and then they tell the others that I'll do this from now on, and then the others agree."

A further example of the strength of emergent roles is the way members of multiplayer communities actively evaluate each others' participation, making "faking" a role difficult in the long run. For example, an interviewee told a story about a player who yearned for recognition as a good player and as someone to whom inexperienced players could turn for help, but who failed miserably because other members of the community could see through his or her charade:

> "[…] for example, there was one person who enthusiastically harassed new players, like 'Who's the man?'"
> Interviewer: "He wanted to be some kind of an educator?"
> "He wanted to be someone they could come to for help. Or of course he didn't want to help everybody but only those who he thought were good guys (laughs)."
> (Interviewee C)

A typical reason for emergent roles within multiplayer communities is excellence in task-related matters, such as skills and knowledge. For example, people with technical know-how can operate as technical advisors, taking care of the infrastructure of the community. Also gaming skills, writing speed, and similar factors can affect the assignment of roles within a community, especially in games or communities where competitive values are asserted. Another typical reason behind role-assignment is a member's contribution to the social reality of a community. For example, even though a member might not be a good player, their witty remarks or kindly approach to other members might lift them above rank-and-file members. As one interviewee answered when asked about the most obvious roles in his community:

> "Ranmar is most important in the game as he is an engineer [this refers to a game-specific function], all orgs need to have a one. Tadel, a walking knowledge base. Buna/Cheren is a helper from a higher level. Vieflan, fun woman, knows shit about the game but is way too sweet not to be noticed. Morell, old school player, you want them too. Ty, Netyr, others are less active, still fine people to see them online. Catir [the leader of the community] is doing the website as well and encouraging people to do crazy things."
> (Interviewee G)

Typically, whatever the stated reason for a member gaining a role within a multiplayer community, this development also includes consideration of that person's commitment and enthusiasm to the common cause. For example, there might be someone more capable of filling a role, but if that someone is not interested or cannot invest enough time and energy in fulfilling the requirements of the role, a more devoted, if less qualified, member may be a better choice.

In a context as complex and multifaceted as multiplayer communities, there are several other factors that can affect role-assignment and an

individual's ability to act out a certain role. Often they are hidden beneath the surface of every-day social interaction. For example, since the realm of computer-mediated communication is not isolated from other aspects of life, factors like owning a fast computer or a good control system such as the specialized control units required by some flight simulators might affect a player's multiplayer community experience. These kinds of factors can be especially relevant in more competitive multiplayer communities. Along the same lines, a player's financial situation and the amount of time they have might affect their ability to participate in the game. There are several other examples of such factors, such as language skills, age, even the time zone one is located in. For example, both communities A and B in Anarchy Online had members from both Europe and North America. Because of the time difference, there were several members whom I rarely saw online, even though I knew they were active members. To me it seemed that most of the members with significant roles were online at similar times during the day, whereas there were some other rank-and-file members like me who dropped in to the game at very unpredictable hours. As far as I know, the significant roles were actually divided pretty evenly across the member base, but if we had had an otherwise active and capable member who was never online at the same time as the rest of us, we quite simply would have known nothing of him or her.

### 6.4.1 Follow the leader!

During the golden years of the Internet (i.e. the early nineties) public discourse was ripe with talk concerning the equalizing and liberating nature of computer-mediated communication. The Internet and other manifestations of new communication technology were supposed to free us from many hierarchies, empowering those who could not make their voices heard before. Such public discourse on the equalizing effects of CMC has toned down from those times and caught up with academic discourse. As research has shown us, while computer-mediated communication might have the potential to override some types of status hierarchies and differences, it also has the potential to impose new ones upon its users, for example based on access to technology or expertise.

Questions of equality and hierarchy are relevant in the context of multiplayer games, too (see e.g. Reid, 1999). The social reality of a multiplayer game can have both ends of the spectrum exist next to one another in an interesting paradox. As Pargman (2005: 107) testifies, "*SvenskMud simultaneously nurtures an ethos of equality and a level playing field (every player starts his life anew in SvenskMud with two empty hands) as well as a fiercely hierarchical and meritocratic power structure.*"

Especially in large multiplayer communities with dozens or more players it is typical to find a hierarchical organization of members. When a new member joins, they often receive the rank of an applicant. After being on probation for a period of time they might be promoted to a rank-and-file

member if they have behaved according to the rules of the community and been active enough. After that there are usually a varying amount of higher ranks, such as lieutenants, ending with generals and presidents at the very top[26].

Hierarchy, then, is often an integral part of the social organization in multiplayer games. Even in those communities where no strict hierarchies are present there is usually at least one member who rules over all - the leader.

Indeed, upon entering the world of multiplayer communities it quickly becomes clear that leaders and leadership matter. From founding a gaming group to accepting new members to disciplining wrongdoers, leadership is an essential part of the multiplayer community process. While leadership can be understood as an interactive process between leaders and followers, this sub-section focuses especially on those individuals whose role within a community, be it designated or emergent, can be recognized as leader by the other members of the community. As we shall see, no other role within multiplayer communities has the same potential for promise and for failure as that of a leader.

The introduction of new communication technology has inspired a whole new area of leadership research that concentrates on leadership in dispersed social networks such as teams and groups (for a review, see e.g. Connaughton & Daly, 2005). This line of research is relevant for multiplayer communities, too, since those multiplayer communities whose members are dispersed have a great deal in common with other forms of dispersed social networks, such as work-teams that operate mainly through CMC. While the actual goals and circumstances of multiplayer communities might differ from the working groups present in industry, for example, some of the most significant questions and challenges remain: physical or temporal separation, or both, resulting in member isolation; technologically mediated communication; and multiple national and other cultures (Holton, 2001; Connaughton & Daly, 2005). Here, a body of people dispersed potentially in numerous ways attempt to create and maintain a social organization that will enable them to achieve something together.

Leadership touches a wide range of phenomena within multiplayer communities. Because of this wide range, not all the aspects of leadership can be discussed within this sub-section. We will return to issues of leadership in sub-section 6.5.1, where issues of power and sanctions for rule breaking are covered, and sub-section 6.6.2, where the disbandment of multiplayer communities is discussed, among others. Within the confines of this sub-section we will analyze three distinct issues of leadership in multiplayer communities which are evident in the data of this study. These include the process of becoming a leader, the effect of leadership on the feeling of community, and the management of the community effort.

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[26] Using a generic military system as the model for naming the different stages of a hierarchy is typical across multiplayer game genres, whether the game itself has a military undertone or not.

**Becoming a leader**

Leadership in multiplayer games is often defined according to the game's dynamics. For example, one game might require one player and one player only to oversee the utilization of common resources while another game might offer such complicated tasks that no single player alone could master them satisfactorily, practically forcing players to adopt some form of joint leadership.

The dynamics of a multiplayer game can have an effect on how leadership is realized. For example, in a typical MMOG such as Anarchy Online the game code gives players the option of forming a group, which could be thought of as a basis for the larger multiplayer communities evident in the game. The code forces at least one player to take responsibility for the group, effectively leading players towards a form of social organization with centralized leadership. Furthermore, the code gives the leading member, or members, practically unlimited power over the structure of the group, including the power to recruit and dismiss members and even the power to disband the community, should they want to.

The possibilities and limitations imposed by the game's dynamics and code are thus something that can affect leadership in multiplayer communities. Usually, especially within the realm of commercial games, players are unable to alter the properties of the game. If a community wanted to be as equal as possible and not to have a designated leader, they might need to engage in extensive negotiation both within the community and with the mechanics of their chosen multiplayer game in order to reach such a state. In some cases it could not even be reached. Many MUDs, being generally noncommercial, allow players greater control over the properties of the game, but not all players are treated equally even there when it comes to implementing changes in the code. Instead, that power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of players and developers who are typically called *gods* or *wizards* (Reid, 1999).

In addition to the external factors discussed above, the question of who becomes leader is very similar to the questions of how other roles within multiplayer communities are distributed. Briefly, leadership can be official or unofficial, and positional or emergent. Quantitative data on MMOGs implies that the majority of leaders of multiplayer communities have reached their position through participation, rather than because they helped to create their communities in the first place (Yee, 2006b). In the data sets of this study, however, those cases where the leader had been one of the founding members of his or her community were in the majority. Overall, both options seem equally possible.

It is fairly typical that multiplayer communities feature at least one strong leader. Furthermore, it is not uncommon that this person has been with the community since its inception. The authority of such leaders is usually unquestionable because of the voluntary nature of these communities. After all, if a member is not happy with the leadership, the other members are often quick to point out that he or she does not have to belong to the community but is free to leave whenever they want. Indeed, the grip such a founding leader

can have on the community is potentially extremely tight, even up to the point that his or her interest and goodwill largely dictate whether the community lives or dies, as we shall see in sub-section 6.6.2 on the disbanding of multiplayer communities.

Leadership in multiplayer communities can be emergent, especially in cases where leadership and management duties are shared. There are several factors that might affect who becomes leader. Participation, enthusiasm, and contribution to the social life of the community are among the factors that can have an effect on a leader emerging from among the rank-and-file members. Typically, leading members are also at least adequate players, if only simply because of the time they spend participating in the game. Such criteria depend on the game and the community in question. Generally, though, they can be attributed to two overarching factors: commitment (as seen in the level of activity and enthusiasm for participation) and perceived contribution to the community effort, which relates to the overall values and goals of the community.

The factors influencing emerging leadership are similar to those evident in the process of becoming a member of a so-called inner circle. The requirements for belonging to the inner circle are discussed in detail in sub-section 6.4.2.

**Leadership influencing the feeling of community**

One of the major tasks of leadership in any multiplayer community is to help the community create a vision which is manifested in the community's values and goals, and then help the community to reach it. Because of the fundamentally voluntary and somewhat fickle nature of these communities, leaders often need to make sure that members stay motivated and get rewarded for participating in the community process. For example, even when talking about every-day management tasks within a multiplayer community, exactly *how* one accomplishes these tasks can be crucial for the leadership. Quite simply, one cannot over-estimate the value of an enthusiastic leader:

> "Well, first of all concerning this clan participation, there is usually somebody with a little bit more zest and flame and charisma than the others, and that person is then, in a way as if born with, automatically pushing others into motion."
> (Interviewee H)

The two multiplayer communities I belonged to in Anarchy Online were similar in their orientation. Both appreciated casual playing over competitive playing, and both promoted the atmosphere of a group of friends hanging out together, having fun in a relaxed way. Their models of leadership differed drastically, though. Alpha had a central leader who behaved in an authoritative manner. For example, he had the last word in decision-making situations and also finally single-handedly disbanded the community. Beta, on the other hand, had developed a model of shared leadership, where no single player had responsibility for the whole community effort. The leaders of these two

communities also positioned themselves very differently towards the membership.

For example, once Alpha had been disbanded by its leader and Beta had been established, the six founding members of Beta actively promoted their idea of what the community was about on the community chat channel as well as on the general news channel that appeared for every member each time they logged in. The leaders stressed how relaxed and enjoyable the community was, and reminded people to bring in everyone they felt would enjoy such an atmosphere:

> "I'm hoping to get this to org grow well, and I'd really appreciate it if people kept an eye out for those they feel deserve to be invited to our Org. We are looking for people who go out of their way to help others out, are chatty and generally seem like good fun people:) […] Thanks for helping guys :D"
> (Message on the community news-channel)

> "I'd like to take a minute to let everyone know that [community name] leadership has chosen to promote three new generals. They have been chosen for being active in the Org, being friendly, and for their willingness to help others."
> (Message on the community news-channel)

As a regular member I noticed that I had a very different attitude to the leaders of Beta than to the leader of Alpha. I noticed that my eagerness to participate was higher in the new community, and the new leaders also felt closer to me than the old one had done. In many ways, this repetitive emphasis on the community spirit became a story that was almost ritualistically presented to one in one situation or another, something we will return to in sub-section 6.5.2 with regards to cohesion and the feeling of community in general.

This differing orientation in the leadership in communities A and B is further exemplified in the log-in messages of the leaders of each community. A log-in message is something that is presented automatically on the community chat-channel whenever a player logs a character into the game. A part of these messages is created automatically, including the name of the character and its experience level. In addition, a player can customize the ending of these messages according to personal preference. In the communities I belonged to, not all members had personalized log-in messages, but the most active members almost invariably did. The leader of the first community used to have rather pompous log-in messages, in which he emphasized his own importance and power:

> "Camo (level 87 Clan Meta-Physicist Squad Commander of [Alpha]) logged on - space and time itself bends under the will of the demi-god as he descends down upon the mortal world"

The over-the-top pompousness of such messages was surely humorous, and there were even competitions among the more active members of Alpha as to who had the most extravagant log-in message. Still, I always had a feeling that

there was a hint of truth to those messages, and the central leader seemed to enjoy being in the spotlight rather too much. The orientation of Alpha always felt more individualistic to me than that of Beta. The leaders of Beta took a totally different approach. Their log-in messages, when used at all, did not emphasize power and status but rather suggested that they were people's servant:

> "Colitris (level 129 Clan Martial Artist president of [Beta]) logged on - How can I be of service?"

This analysis is based heavily on my own experiences as a player and those signals that can be interpreted from the communication on the community channels. For example, one other member did not see much of a difference between the two communities, except that the latter one had, according to him, "*no actual leader*" (Interviewee B). However, I was not totally alone in my feelings, as can be seen from another member's reply to a log-in message of Alpha's leader's alternative character:

> Bourne (level 113 Clan Enforcer President of [Alpha]) logged on - the earth shakes and the heavens tremble of his awesome power.
> Mordanam: heh, what an ego

The timing of the participant observation can offer one possible explanation of the differing orientation of the community leaders proposed above. Because I had entered Alpha when it was already well established, I never experienced it during its early days like I did with Beta. It is possible, even likely, that Alpha's leader was enthusiastic and open in the beginning, but that his enthusiasm decreased over time. Such a development could be seen with the leaders of Beta as well, as the outspoken enthusiasm was certainly less evident in the last days of my participant observation, just weeks before the disbandment of the community.

There is no clear definition of what constitutes enthusiastic behavior, but it is often connected to aspects such as visioning, caring for other members and devotion to the community effort. Whatever the signals through which a community's leader's enthusiasm becomes evident to the other members, a leader's enthusiasm seems to convey the idea that the community is active and that it cares for its members. (see e.g. Koh & Kim, 2004.)

The tendencies presented above were visible in both interviews and participant observation, and across small and large communities, regardless of whether the communities operated solely in a computer-mediated context or included a face-to-face element to their social interaction. This finding is an interesting one, and fits in knowledge we have of other CMC-heavy contexts such as dispersed work groups (Connaughton & Daly, 2004). It seems that as long as leadership manages to convey an image of enthusiasm and of being there for community members, factors such as physical distance or the actual ways in which the community is in contact with one another might, despite

their intuitive significance, make less of a difference. Put another way, even if a community is close in physical distance, if the leader appears inaccessible to members or uninterested in the community effort, there is a real chance that the feeling of community will be adversely affected.

Leadership, then, can be an integral factor in the development of a feeling of community. Even though this analysis concluded by stressing the significance of officially labeled leaders' enthusiasm, it is not too far-fetched to think that sometimes this role of a motivational leader could be taken by someone else entirely, for example someone who through his or her participation in the community effort has gained the respect of the other members.

**Managing the community effort**

There can be many kinds of management-related tasks within multiplayer communities. For example, many of the more complex multiplayer games include tasks that can, or indeed should, be planned in advance, such as playing an important tournament match against another community, or trying to solve a particularly difficult mission requiring the special skills of many characters. After the planning there might be tasks such as gathering the members together, organizing task-specific roles such as who should concentrate on attacking and who on defending play, and supervision of the actual gaming event that was planned.

As we have seen in the previous sub-section, the members of multiplayer communities can have varying roles assigned to them or these roles can develop informally through time. Especially in smaller groups on their way to becoming communities, however, it is often the one central leader who carries most of the relevant organizatory roles on his or her shoulders:

> "But usually the leader and some of his most trusted friends take care of everything. For example in [community name] I am the leader, and I then organize our matches and deal with tactics, I take care that people come to the server and herd them in all possible aspects. I remember the first game that we played in something like ninety-nine. It was totally horrible, first I needed to get everyone to appear and then to tried to tell them what to do, and we were so tense about the first match that we lost something like forty-nil or even more. But you gotta have that first match sometime." (Interviewee D)

Issues of management seem to be more pronounced within multiplayer games and communities that have clear task-related goals. In communities that have less structured task-oriented goals, there seems to be either less need for management or less need for *central* management. In addition, other studies have illustrated how the likelihood of engaging in formal management practices becomes more likely the larger the community grows (Williams et. al., 2006).

Still, even those multiplayer communities without a strong task-related orientation can benefit from clearly allocated management responsibilities in the long run. For example, both communities A and B in Anarchy Online had a

mainly casual orientation. This did not mean that the members of these communities did not participate in task-related activities. Indeed, a significant portion of the gameplay of typical multiplayer games includes or even stresses completing structured tasks; should a player truly want to experience and enjoy all the facets of typical FPS and MMO games, for example, avoiding these tasks altogether is not an option. The fact that neither community had a member or members who was specifically responsible for managing concerted tasks such as raiding[27] meant that neither community really succeeded in organizing raids. Occasionally someone tried to organize a concerted effort on the community chat channel or via the news board, but these attempts seldom succeeded and generally withered away after the initial rush.

Another management task typically given to leaders is the signing on of new members. Especially in new and small multiplayer communities it is possible that every new member is handpicked by one leader. Even in larger communities where the responsibilities of recruitment have been shared, there are usually a few members through whom most new recruits join the social network of the community. Thus, it is possible that a new member will have no other ties within the community network than to those who took him or her in. While it is clear that by active participation it is possible to quickly form ties within the network, the fact remains that the initial contact, i.e. the leader or recruiter, can have a positive impact on the process of building up contacts between community members, if only by introducing the new member to the others. Indeed, there is some indication that leaders can have a significant effect on what kinds of relationships form between community members, especially in the early stages of online communities and in those communities that have originated through computer-mediated communication (Koh & Kim, 2004).

Being a leader can be a rewarding role, but it certainly is not always easy. Indeed, many communities, especially those experiencing growth in numbers beyond the organizing capabilities of a single leader, choose to divide the responsibilities, and the power, of a leader between various members. These members usually come from the inner circle, a small group of active or otherwise noteworthy members whom we shall meet in the next pages.

### 6.4.2 The inner circle

In small groups and teams playing multiplayer games all members can be equally involved. This becomes increasingly unlikely the larger the community grows. Multiplayer communities can have several dozen members or more, even up to more than a hundred members. In communities as big as this membership are likely to differ in their devotion and commitment to the community. Some members participate less enthusiastically, while others spend all their free time engaged in community activities. Similarly, members differ in

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27 Another term with a military background. Raiding usually means collecting a group of players for a specific purpose, such as capturing property belonging to enemy communities.

their impact and importance to the community. It might not be a problem to a community if a group of rank-and-file members are absent for a period of time, but the absence of those who are responsible for many of the activities within the community would be likely to prove detrimental. In the words of Wilson (1973: 306), these differences in members can be conceptualized by imagining them, "[…] *being distributed in a kind of onion-ring formation in which commitment lessens as the outer circles are approached*". Typically, in such a model the very centre is reserved for a leader or leaders, with each subsequent layer holding more members than the previous one.

It is the few inner layers of this onion-like structure that are the focus of this sub-section. Members who can be situated in those layers can be seen as forming a small group of active and influential members within a larger community. These members are from now on referred to as the *inner circle*.

It is in the nature of large social networks such as communities to be more diffuse than small social networks, such as small groups and teams. In a large social network not every member of the community has a tie with every other member, but rather members differ in their centrality to the social network of the community. In the case of large multiplayer communities, for example, it is typical to find members who have a few or only one real tie with other members:

> "There's the core group and then there's the rest who might know each other situated around them. It is not so essential that those others know each other across the boundaries that well, for example there are people who know like one person." (Interviewee A)

While the concept of the inner circle is typical of multiplayer communities, it is often not easy to distinguish just who belongs to it and who does not. Indeed, the boundaries of the inner circle can be as difficult to identify as those of the whole community. Who belongs to the inner circle might differ according to whom one asks, and when one asks them. In addition, the delicate hierarchies and division of power might be difficult for an outsider to observe. There is not necessarily a clear border between each of the rings of the onion-like structure.

If a community has many officially appointed roles, it is likely that the holders of the most significant ones will belong to the inner circle. The members of the inner circle are also likely to have unofficial roles, based on their participation in the community effort. Belonging to the inner circle can be seen as a role in itself, meaning that many of the general phenomena related to roles, such as how one earns them, apply to the inner circle as well.

One of the major functions of the inner circle in multiplayer communities is to share leadership responsibilities and power. In the two communities I belonged to during the participant observation, leadership was divided very differently. As another member put it:

> (Interviewee B): "[…] In that [Beta] there were those five members who were sort of leaders, or perhaps one could rather call them pace-setters or something. Not one of

> them was like a real leader. They decided on things pretty much jointly, its was not like a dictatorship but rather such a community or a commune."
> Interviewer: "Do you think it differs from the style of leadership in [Alpha]?"
> (Interviewee B): "Well yes, in that sense that there it was the [name of the leader of Alpha] who had the final word. In [Beta] they sort of learnt from that experience, and tried to keep it so that there was no particular leader."

Looking at the inner circle from the viewpoint of official roles and the division of power and status, then, is one way of looking at its composition, and leads to the following observations. Firstly, as with leaders, it is sometimes enough to be one of the founding members of the community. For example, a group of friends might decide to found a multiplayer community using their original small group as the basis. Later on this group might grow in size, expanding into a more complicated social network with community-like qualities. While it is possible that some of the new members will be introduced into the inner circle, it is equally possible that those few founding members will continue to form a significant portion of it. In a way, their "onion" has grown around them.

Secondly, members of a multiplayer community can also earn their way to the core of the community. In these cases, active or otherwise useful participation (i.e. possessing vital technical expertise) in the community effort can result in increased status. This kind of moving from the outer edge to the core of a community can take a long time. Furthermore, the ease with which one can move from one "layer" to the other can differ (see e.g. Barker, 1968: 51). It might be easy to move from the initial level of a rank-and-file member to the more demanding petty officer, but progress towards the core of the community might become increasingly hard the further one proceeds. There might even be some distinct borders through which it is extremely difficult to pass, such as gaining a wizard's status in a MUD (Pargman, 2005).

A member of a multiplayer community might also gain access to the inner circle through some other means, such as when a relative or a long-time face-to-face friend of the community leader joins in and is immediately promoted because of his or her previous behavior in other contexts.

On the other hand, status or official roles alone are insufficient to explain the whole phenomenon of the inner circle. For example, if a random community member were asked who the most influential members of his or her community are, that person might or might not name the holders of the most significant official roles. Besides, the inner circle is not permanent but can change according to changing situations within the community. Especially with the growth of a community it might become necessary to expand the inner circle in order to keep it proportional to the rank-and-file members. It is also possible for an inactive member to drop out of the inner circle save for a few special cases[28].

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[28] Sometimes game-related structural factors impose a framework that can be hard to break, even with the agreement of the whole multiplayer community. For example, the underlying game code might give all the management rights such as the right to enrol and disband members to one person, who will then effectively remain a member of the inner circle whether he or she participates actively in the community

To really *be* a member of the inner circle, then, usually requires more than a title.

There are two concurring findings apparent in both the interview and observation data that help us understand who constitute the inner circle and what kind of contribution they potentially have to offer to their community. The first of these is the significance of presence and the second is a member's contribution to the community process.

**Being present**

The concept of presence in computer-mediated contexts is problematic and can be approached from many different points of view (for a review on the concept of presence in CMC literature, see e.g. Lombard & Ditton, 1997). With regards to community in multiplayer communities, I concentrate especially on the idea of a sense of virtual *togetherness* as presented by Durlach & Slater (2000). In their model, a sense of virtual togetherness originates from two mutually supportive dimensions - the sense of being present in a shared virtual environment and communicating with other people in that environment. It is this sense of togetherness that I mean when talking about presence.

Often, especially in environments that utilize only textual communication, people have to go to great lengths in order to create a feeling of being there with others. In a way, multiplayer games differ from many other contexts of computer-mediated communication in that they typically include a specific metaphor for a place, a virtual world, and emphasize action that takes place within that place. Furthermore, multiplayer games typically fulfill one of the most important elements that can enhance a person's sense of being present in a virtual environment, by allowing players' interactions with the environment to be perceived and even to affect other players' gaming experience, and by allowing players to participate in collaborative work within the environment. Indeed, one key element in being immersed in these virtual worlds is the notion that there are other players there, too, and that the game is shaped in the interaction between players.

Still, multiplayer games are similar to other contexts of CMC in that simply logging in is not enough to produce a sense of togetherness. One also has to interact with others, to communicate with them (Durlach & Slater, 2000). For example, in typical MUDs and MMOGs the game world is so large and the gameplay so multifaceted that members of the same multiplayer community can play simultaneously, yet totally separate from one another. In effect, they might be actively participating in the *game*, but not in the *community*. Thus, keeping the community's communication channels open and flowing with messages is important for a feeling of active participation and liveliness.

To connect quantity of communication with prestige within a community might seem counter intuitive. After all, one of the major universal norms of

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effort or not. Ousting this person might not be an option, as it might result in the collapse of the whole community structure.

computer-mediated communication is to avoid spam, and large numbers of messages might easily be interpreted as such. Nevertheless, there seems to be a positive connection between the frequency of communication and a person's status within a multiplayer community. One thing that helps us understand this phenomenon is the fundamental quality of presence in computer-mediated communication, which stresses active participation and is intolerant of absence:

> "[…] especially with younger players, there might come someone who plays really actively for a while, and that is most probably how I did it, too. And then they leave or start to play less frequently. In a way you really forget people quickly if they are not there every day (laughs)."
> (Interviewee C)

There might also be certain positions or roles within a multiplayer community that require more than a passing interest. The amount of communication can then be a key factor in deciding who ends up in these positions. As one interviewee responsible for organizing tournaments and similar events within his multiplayer community explained:

> "I don't like to be in too many clans at once, because you are supposed to be active. So if you are in too many clans and you are supposed to go to every meeting of every clan and you are supposed to be active. I mean if I was part of the virtual reality maybe I would (laughs), but I still have a life. I think that one clan is more than enough, since in this clan where I am right now I am actually an important member of it, just because I can be more active."
> (Interviewee F)

While the inner circle of a newborn multiplayer community might be heavily dominated by the people who founded the community in the first place, newcomers to it usually have to earn their place by being involved in the community's day to day actions. This process of expanding the inner circle becomes especially important in communities that are growing rapidly, as suggested by one leader of a multiplayer community.

> Interviewer: "Is it just first come first served, or is it possible that the backbone will change?"
> Interviewee G: "Funny you asking that. We are just so far that we are thinking of expanding our backbone."
> Interviewer: "How would that happen?"
> Interviewee G: "You have people that are just too much online and too involved to be overlooked."

The significance of presence can be further understood through its usefulness in signaling *commitment* to the community effort. A committed member is willing to give his or her energy and loyalty to the multiplayer community. Commitment is typically thought to include a psychological element as well, implying the attachment of personality systems to social ties (Kanter, 1968: 499,

according to Wilson, 1973: 301). As can be seen from the previous excerpt, community members actively evaluate each other's level of commitment.

**Contribution to the community effort**

Despite the importance of the sense of togetherness, merely being present in the community is usually not enough to establish a member's position in the inner circle. One's participation also has to have a qualitative element to it, contributing to the community effort on some level. For example, in both Alpha and Beta in Anarchy Online there were members who were often present in the game world yet did not belong to the inner circle (neither to the official inner circle evident in the role division, nor to my perception of the inner circle). They exchanged greetings and goodbyes just like everyone else, but mostly concentrated on advancing their game in an individualistic manner.

A member's contribution to the community effort can take many forms. In a typical case, a member might have knowledge or skills that other members do not possess, thus making him or her invaluable to the community. For example, a person might be considered to be a technical advisor, or he or she might be good at organizing events that others enjoy participating in but loathe to organize themselves. Such a case was clearly exemplified by one interviewee, who had a central position in his community, not because of his playing skills, but because of his value in management:

> "But there are, for example, periods of time when I don't actually play, I am just active otherwise. I moderate a message board, or organize a tournament in the clan. Last time I organized a tournament I didn't actually play because I was organizing. Actually I prefer this side of the whole thing to the actual playing. But that is me. Some people just play, they never write on the forum, they never do this. It seems as if they were not part of the clan. They just come to the meeting, they play, and then they go away. I don't really like it, but I'm not their boss so I can't tell them."
> (Interviewee F)

The contribution to community effort can also be seen from another point of view - that of complying with the basic values and goals of the community. This is important because as we have seen, members of the inner circle may be among the most active, and thus visible to the community's members. Such visibility is not limited to the community, but can often be seen by outsiders as well. In a way one can think of the inner circle as an embodiment of the community "spirit". Therefore it is sometimes the case that members of the inner circle have to comply with more stringent standards than rank-and-file members.

For example, both Alpha and Beta in Anarchy Online had a decidedly casual atmosphere, promoting sociability over competition. In effect, what this meant was that in both communities there was a positive attitude towards members engaging in social chit chat on the community channel. In many ways, it was exactly that social aspect that attracted people to the community channel. Against this background one could expect that the inner circle would happily

engage in the socially oriented talk on the community channel, something that also took place. One aspect of such social orientation was evident in the amount of self-disclosure concerning matters outside the game. Even though the volume of general communication does not necessarily correlate with the degree of self-disclosure, in the multiplayer communities being observed many of the active members engaged in the process of self-disclosure with more enthusiasm than the more passive members. This became evident especially in an interview with a fellow member which has already been discussed in sub-section 6.3.2. During the interview, we exchanged views on some central members of the community. Importantly, we mostly had similar ideas of who those members were. We also actually knew (or thought we knew) many details of those members' lives outside the gameworld, whereas there were many other members of the community about whom we had no such information.

In conclusion, while both quantity and quality of participation in the community effort can be important in their own right when determining who belongs to the inner circle, they are seldom enough by themselves. Rather, a combination of quality and quantity is required. Members of the inner circle are likely to be more committed to the community effort than rank-and-file members, which also shows in their participation. They are also likely to benefit the community effort in some way. Both of these qualities have to be perceived and appreciated by the other members of the community. Thus, belonging to an inner circle is not a stable trait. Over time, inactivity or failure to meet with the community's values and goals can result in a member losing his or her status in the eyes of other community members.

Figure 5 shows an illustration of the dynamics of the inner circle. The illustration is based on the data analysis presented above, in addition to which it expands on thoughts of Barker (1968), Wilson (1973) and Pargman (2005). In the figure, a multiplayer community is seen as organized into layers of membership within each other. The size of each layer symbolizes the amount of members on it. In this figure, the inner circle would be situated somewhere near the center, encompassing either the two or three smallest layers of the membership.

The intensity of color of each layer of Figure 5 symbolizes both the visibility/presence and the contribution of the members within it. Thus, members in the innermost layers can generally be seen as having a more significant impact on the community process than those in the outer layers. The arrows going in and out of the ring-formation illustrate that membership moves from layer to layer according to various factors, such as amount of participation. Following the ideas of Barker's (1968) field theory in ecological psychology and Pargman's analysis of social organization in MUDs, I have emphasized the borders of the inner layers of the onion structure. This emphasis illustrates that the borders between layers are not necessarily equally difficult to penetrate, but that the core of the onion structure is more stable than

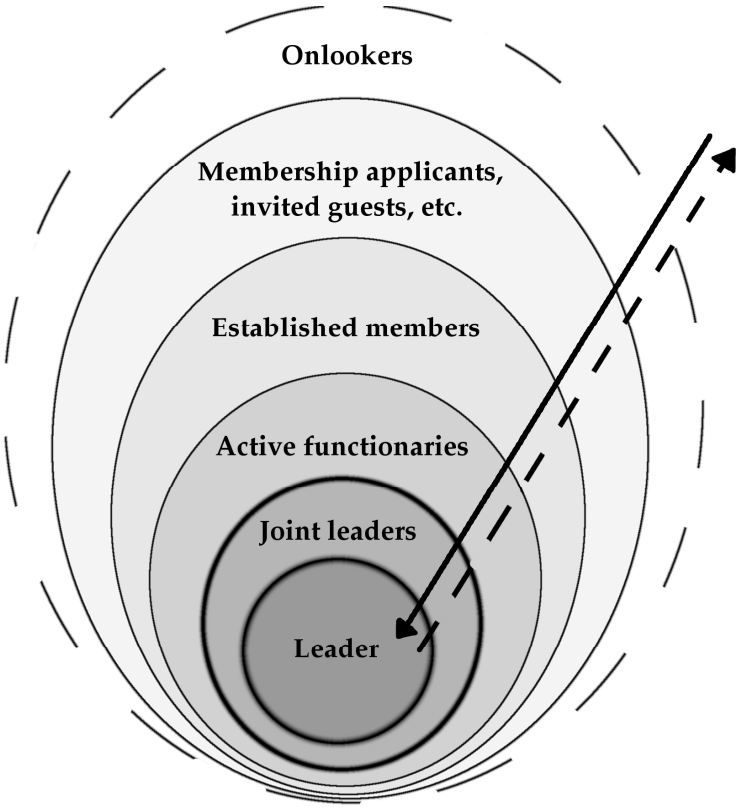


FIGURE 5 The onion-ring formation of a multiplayer community (Expanding on Barker, 1968; Wilson, 1973; Pargman, 2005)

the outer rings. Lastly, the outermost layer of the ring-formation shows a porous border, reminding us of the permeability of social networks such as multiplayer communities.

## 6.5 At the heart of community

A multiplayer community can be a long-lasting, complex social network. The viewpoint adopted in this study sees communities as processes that are inherently symbolic. Such a viewpoint stresses that communication in a community is loaded with implicit meanings that can only be truly understood by those "at the heart of the community". These meanings are negotiated through time, and as such are an essential part of the community process. This negotiation contributes directly to the emergence of group identity and a feeling of community (Cohen, 1989; Jenkins, 1996).

This section discusses a number of key aspects of the community process that are essential for symbolic communality. Ritualistic events and story-telling, as well as a shared sense of what kind of behavior is allowed and how transgression is dealt with enable community members to engage in a boundary-defining process between themselves and those on the outside.

The first sub-section of this section analyses the norms and rules that govern participation within a multiplayer community context. The second sub-section discusses the process of enhancing community cohesiveness by means of story-telling and ritualistic communication.

### 6.5.1 Playing by the book - norms, rules, and breaking them

Just as it was thought that computer-mediated communication would liberate its users from the traditional chains of identity, so early CMC research harbored ideas that online social interaction would be somewhat less bound by traditional social restraints than face-to-face communication. This was based on the observation that in certain situations people were more uninhibited online than they were face-to-face (see e.g. Sproull & Kiesler, 1986).

It is not difficult to see how this idea of social norms and rules having less effect on online social interaction came about. After all, the public discourse on CMC saw themes of liberty, equality, and an ethos of "the Wild West" thrown about until the late 1990s. Some of the same themes still surface every once in a while in today's discourse. At the same time, actual research on CMC was often conducted in laboratories with groups of people previously unknown to each other, and it suffered from the newness of the phenomenon of CMC. For example, research on groups of people previously unknown to each other and interacting through computer-mediated means found confusing behavior at times, where the participants presented both more aggressive and disrespectful behavior as well as increased friendliness and intimacy (Reid 1999, 112). Similarly, a researcher stepping into the world of online communities and bearing a mindset inherited from face-to-face contexts was bound to have difficulties adjusting to the new environment. This is because rules, expectations, and rights can manifest themselves in different ways in a computer-mediated environment compared to face-to-face contexts, making them difficult to locate if the observer is inexperienced and does not know where to look (Reid 1999, 112).

Still, it has been clear for a long time that online social networks cannot operate without some kind of control. For example, spamming, that is flooding the communication channels with an amount of information that is disruptive to others using it, is a phenomenon that has been around since the introduction of computer-mediated communication networks. Already in the initial research on communication in such networks there is mention of spamming, or filibustering, and of its destructive and thus undesirable nature (Licklider & Taylor 1968, 34–35). Being a type of behavior that is made possible by technology, spamming is typically combatted not only by means of norms and rules, but also with technical solutions, such as automated bots forcing a spammer to leave a chat channel. Along the same lines, already in the mid-seventies there were instances of bulletin boards crashing because of deliberate overflooding of messages, leading to the introduction of technical solutions by

which systems administrators could supervise the flow of messages and alter or remove them if necessary (Stone, 1991, according to Reid, 1999).

While the general flow of computer-mediated communication often appears chaotic, erratic, or even anarchistic, the long-lasting operation of social networks is not possible without some kind of social organization. Simply put, anarchy is something of an antithesis to community. There has been remarks and asides about "AnarchyMUDs", where the general intention has been to avoid the creation of norms and rules, but apparently none of these experiments has existed very long despite people showing initial interest in them (see e.g. Curtis, 1997: 138-139). Indeed, the social reality of a community is always structured to some extent. This is because the very concept of community requires some form of continuity, and continuity necessarily leads to the emergence of social structure. In a community without order, people will sooner or later inevitably start to develop norms and rules (see e.g. Danet 2001, 275; see also Dibbel, (1998) for a famous example of an online community negotiating its norms and rules in the face of conflict).

In this study, norms are seen as shared patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior. They can exist on a relatively implicit, unconscious level. Examples of norms in the context of multiplayer games might be knowledge of what language to use on what chat channels, or a preference to keep certain types of in-game messages short (see e.g. Kolo & Baur, 2004).

Rules, on the other hand, are seen as a code of conduct that is more clearly articulated and defined. Norms and rules can be mutually supportive, but they might also contradict one another, for example when a new leader issues a rule but the majority of the community's members choose not to follow it and behave according to their established concept of "what's right".

Together, norms and rules help configure social interaction within groups and communities. Conversely, by looking at the social interaction within a given group or a community we can find out about its norms and rules, making them an essential part of the community process. Negotiating norms and rules is an ongoing task where continuous cooperation and the contribution of the community members is required. (Sproull & Faraj, 1995; Watson, 1997.)

Both data sets of this study showed instances when community members engaged in active negotiation concerning norms and rules. While some communities presented authoritative models of decision-making in this regard, it was more common to find at least some level of democracy:

> Interviewee H: "Yeah, well of these groups of my own I have the experience that they have been interested in hearing others out, they have listened to people and everyone has certainly dared to say his or her opinion. It hasn't been like, difficult. On the other hand at times there have been such experiences that people have been looking for a leader, or like who would take that role here and now. But mostly it's my experience that it is very democratic."

There seems to be a general tension between an authoritative and a democratic approach when it comes to making decisions about norms and rules in

multiplayer communities. For example, members might not feel the need to comply with authoritatively presented requests, or might even actively rebel against them. For example, in Alpha there was one especially memorable instance when the community leader tried to make other members abandon what they were doing and help him with a chore totally irrelevant to anyone but him. In many ways there is nothing wrong with such a request, as one of the more common norms we shall look at in this sub-section deals with reciprocity among community members. Still, it was interesting to notice that not a single member online at that time wanted to help the leader out despite his continual requests that turned from playful threats to attempts at bribery to actual sulking, resulting in the leader in question logging out of the game after twenty minutes of wasted breath. In fact, one of the other members even mocked him while this was occurring, something I did not see often in the usually very polite communication climate of both communities A and B.

This tension between authoritative and democratic approaches to who decides community issues can be thought of as existing on a grander level as well, between the individual multiplayer communities and the general framework of the multiplayer game. It has been proposed that a community not only needs some kind of shared norms and rules in order to function properly, but also that it is beneficial if the community itself can somehow affect both the creation and controlling of these norms and rules (Kollock & Smith, 1996; Galston, 2000). For example, should a multiplayer game impose too strict a set of rules on the communities within, it might result in an unpredictable backlash, possibly even players abandoning the game in favor of one where they feel like they are in control. Echoing these ideas, Jakobsson and Taylor (2003) argue that it is a right choice for developers of MMOGs to give players at least partial responsibility for the creation of norms and rules.

When speaking of norms and rules in the context of multiplayer communities, there are two levels one has to be aware of. Firstly, there are generally shared norms within the grand context of online multiplayer gaming, many of which are similar to those evident in behavior in communication networks as a whole. Secondly, a multiplayer community might have norms and rules of its own.

Whether a player chooses to join a specific multiplayer community or not, they must abide by the general norms and rules that govern players' behavior in multiplayer games. These include bans on racist remarks and sexual harassment, avoidance of filling communication channels with spam, and refraining from shouting, which can be simulated by USING ONLY CAPITAL LETTERS. There is usually a variety of unwanted behavior in every online multiplayer game, such as player killing, stealing from other players, and using scripted macros to execute game commands in a way that gives one player an unfair advantage in relation to other players. Typically, there are rules forbidding many of these, governed by the administrators of the game whether the game is commercial or not. For example, in Anarchy Online a player could

report misbehavior to the ARKs, who would then review the situation and take action if necessary.

The second type of norms and rules are the ones that might be characteristic of a specific community, differentiating it from others. It is these norms and rules that will be discussed over the next pages. Towards the end of the sub-section, the question of punishing transgression is addressed.

Both the communities observed during the participant observation and the accounts of the interviewees presented many examples of the existence of norms and rules within multiplayer communities. More often than not there were few actual written rules, and even when a community used such rules they typically followed the lines of general "netiquette" found everywhere in the contexts of CMC.

**Commitment to the community effort**

One distinct group of norms and rules concerned the level of commitment tp the activities of a community. Typically, there were two approaches to this in the data. First, there were expectations concerning the amount of time and energy members should put into their community. Second, there were expectations concerning loyalty, for example in the form of not belonging to more than one community. The question of loyalty also surfaced in those cases where the community tried to exert some social control over its members, such as when ensuring that members did not misbehave towards other multiplayer communities. I will now look at each of these cases in turn.

Multiplayer communities differ in their expectations concerning the contribution of individual members. In some cases, especially when the community is more like a group or a team and involves a heavy competitive element, time spent participating in community activities can be stringently monitored. Some communities even go so far as to make specific rules on the matter, where they clearly state the kind of contribution they expect from every member. These kind of outspoken rules help the community to keep its member base consistent, as everyone who stays is forced to comply with them or leave the community. As one interviewee noted:

> "I used to be in another clan in another game that was Aliens vs. Predator, but I didn't like it because it was almost military in a sense that I had to be in every meeting, and if I didn't go I had to give a good reason why."
> (Interviewee F)

Expecting devotion from members is not limited to competitive multiplayer communities, however. Even in communities where the community's goals revolve more around relaxation and spending time with like-minded individuals, there can be unspoken norms concerning levels of participation.

Looking back to sub-section 6.4.2 we remember the inner circle of significant and usually active members who stood at the heart of the community. In addition to these few devoted individuals, a large multiplayer

community can have a body of less active members, with an outer ring of members and acquaintances of members who might contribute relatively little both quantitatively and qualitatively to the community effort.

Each multiplayer community makes its own statement of how committed they expect their members to be. Typically, it is possible to keep the status of a member for a while even when not participating, but long-term absence or inactivity is treated as a reason to revoke membership. Some communities use technical tools to control the level of participation, where those who have not logged in or communicated on the community channels for a chosen period of time are automatically ejected or at least put under extra scrutiny by the community leaders.

Another aspect of the question of devotion is loyalty. According to the data, a typical norm within multiplayer communities was that players of any one multiplayer game should not belong to more than one community within it at a time. Although this was not a universal norm, the sentiments expressed by interviewees on the subject were at times exceedingly strong, even downright hostile to those that failed to observe it. One interviewee even used the term "clan whore" to describe players who belong to more than one community at a time or change their allegiance too often, which, even when used light-heartedly, tells us a lot about the importance of this norm in some circles.

Loyalty is also evident in the way some multiplayer communities can try to control the behavior of their members. For example, in tightly bound face-to-face communities social control can ensure that community members do not engage in undesirable relationships outside the community. Another example is the extent to which companies control the communication of their employees. In the multiplayer gaming context, the opportunities to exert such control over a person's behavior are often less obvious. After all, in a context that is fundamentally voluntary and offers great individual freedom of movement, it is difficult to force someone to behave in a particular way. Still, the long-term nature of multiplayer communities can give a multiplayer community significant leverage over its members. After investing possibly hundreds of hours in the game, leaving and starting anew when faced with social control might not present itself as an option (on social control in CMC in general, see e.g. Wellman, 1997: 193-195). As one leader of a multiplayer community put it, despite the control he exerts over his subordinates, there is relatively little rebellion:

> "[…] I take care that in my clan people don't start to whine to opponents. If they do so, well, I can look at it for awhile, especially if it is humorous. But if it goes too far I just kick them out. Well, the only person I have had to really kick out happened just the other week. Me, my friend and this guy were playing a game of three versus three. We played a game that lasted for twenty minutes, and always when I said something like now let's do so and so, he said that he's not into it and left in the other direction to do something by himself. It became really difficult since me and [friend] had to play the two of us most of the time. In the end I really lost it when this guy had not done anything and I just had to kick him out. Other manners I don't require,

> just that you basically act like a gentleman, don't whine and do what you need to do."
> (Interviewee K)

**Reciprocity among community members**

In addition to commitment, multiplayer communities typically include the norm of reciprocity among community members. It is also typical of online groups in general to include the norm of reciprocity and of helping other members as a part of belonging to the group (Wellman, 1997: 186–187). As one interviewee said about this:

> "[…] if a clan member asks for a certain item and you don't have any use for it at the moment, you should really give it away. The clan members are in an advantageous position when compared to others, like if you are thinking should I give this item to this friend or that one, and the other one is in the same clan, that one immediately gets it. […] when you log in and start shouting on the channels that where in the world are you, you usually immediately get an answer that I am helping another clan member to win a bossmonster or, things like that, and of course that meant that you also joined in then."
> (Interviewee O)

The purpose of reciprocity in communities goes beyond mere instrumentality. When a member gives support or help to another member, this act is often visible to the whole community. It can, therefore, be seen as developing the norm of reciprocity further along the lines of joint responsibility over the social network of the community (see e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1997: 186–189).

The norms of commitment and reciprocity together form a powerful scale on which to weigh up the worth of a member to the community. One of the most serious offences against a typical multiplayer community is to join in, take the benefits and give nothing in return. Such behavior can easily result in the member being ejected from the community. Willingness to help other members can be seen as a sign of a strong attachment to the community. Willingness to help should not be seen as being limited to strong ties only, though. Norms of reciprocity can exist both in communities that are tightly knit and in those networks that are more loosely knit, based mostly on weak ties (Constant, Sproull & Kiesler, 1996).

**Structuring the flow of the game and the interaction within**

In addition to norms and rules concerning the level of commitment and reciprocity among community members, both interview and observation data included several examples of the ways in which communication within multiplayer games and communities can be normatively regulated. Community members might be expected to greet other members when they log in and say goodbye on their way out, and even the way they speak on the community channel can be regulated. For example in Anarchy Online, both Alpha and Beta

had a declared agreement not to use the community chat channel as a substitute for a team chat channel. This meant that even when a smaller team of the community's members was assembled, they were supposed to talk to each other outside the community chat channel. However, the unspoken norm was that when there were only a few community members online, the rule could be broken. Another similar example was a rule that was introduced to me in Beta. There were incidents when the talk on Beta's chat channel bordered on the sexually explicit. This might have had something to do with the fact there were at least two romantic couples within the membership. One of the community leaders had to issue a warning concerning this kind of behavior on the community news channel, reminding members that while they could say what they wanted on the private channels, the community channel was considered to be a place that even minors should be able to view.

A typical example of the kinds of norms that help structure the flow of the game is the way in which players might be expected to warn their team-mates of their impending departure from the group, as can be seen in the next excerpt:

> [Team] Groo: and I must warn you already that I must go in about 30 minutes
> [Team] Metachrys: o
> [Team] Lizzis: me in about an hour
> [Team] Groo: lunch-time:)
> [Team] Groo: and need to do something else after that (gasp!)
>
> Ningor: I'm going to log out now, but I will be on at something like 23:00 CET. So if you try to take a tower or something. Count me in!
> Orbitel: no tower today
> Ningor: :( But I will still be on later...

In the heat of the game it is relatively common to see people disappearing for periods of time, compelled to do so by off-line events. Even though the use of a simple acronym, such as afk, is sometimes sufficient, most people expect some sort of verbal confirmation when players leave the group they are playing with. Off-line information is often used to explain or clarify online events. For example, people might explain their absence from the game or the community by giving personal information, as evident in the following excerpt (see also Baym, 2000: 153):

> [Team] Ilona: ack the beasts have awakened…I may need afk to make them breakfast
> [Team] Groo: ;)
> [Team] Ilona: maybe if I'm real quiet they won't notice?
> […]
> [Team] Groo: hee
> [Team] Groo: better not
> [Team] Coredor: that you are playing their game:)

As mentioned earlier, both Alpha and Beta had a norm about the way a community member should enter and leave the community chat channel. This procedure always followed the same form: a member logged in, greeted the

others and was greeted by at least a few other members. After this the one who had logged in typically commanded an extension of the chat application to present a list of all the members online at the moment. The information on this list was used to check whether friends were online and had perhaps just been too busy to extend a greeting. Furthermore, the list presented information on each members' character's level in the game, something that one needed to know in order to be able to organize joint gaming efforts:

"Wald": Minnaras (level 62 Clan Adventurer General of [Beta]) logged on
"Dawnsword": Venturi, if ya see a very red nasty looking bot can u coord me plz
"Grimjim": yes pls
"Venturi": sure...i forget his name....
"Wald": Andrei (level 36 Clan Trader Applicant of [Beta]) logged on. Main: Lunena

[The community channel "bot" announces the arrival of two community members on the channel. The second of them has an extra mention after the normal announcement, showing that the character that logged on is a secondary incarnation of a player whose "main" character is better known within the community. This kind of information made it possible to recognize the active players even when they played different characters.]

"Wald": Purple (level 26 Clan Shade Unit Member of [Beta]) logged on
"Dawnsword": heh me too
"Purple": hi all
"Grimjim": live metal
"Dawnsword": purple I have stuff for u
"Minnaras": hi everyone
"Venturi": live metal?
"Demeter": hia purple
"Demeter": and Minnaras
"Venturi": he's here
"Dawnsword": hey hey
"Spiritinker": hi all new logged in ;-)
"Dawnsword": wheres here ?

[Dawnsword presents a "where?"-question, to which Venturi answers two lines down by typing in a string of numbers that are map coordinates.]

"Minnaras": :)
"Venturi":1567,2185
"Minnaras": online all

[Minnaras types in one of the commands most used straight after logging in. By asking the community channel bot to list all players present, it was possible to gain a quick insight into the current state of the community. The listing provided shows the names, levels or experience, status within the community, and professions (within the game) of all those present.]

"Wald": Users online: 13 players online: Andrei Level 36 Applicant - Trader, Demeter Level 140 General - Nano-Technician, Dawnsword Level 140 Unit Commander - Shade, Spiritinker Level 84 Applicant - Engineer, Grimjim Level 64 Unit Leader -

> Soldier, Groo Level 87 Applicant - Doctor, Lillero Level 60 Unit Leader - Enforcer, Mimi White Fang (Neutral). Level 142 Unit Member - Meta-Physicist, Purple Level 26 Unit Member - Shade, Ramones Level 97 General - Adventurer, Sidhatha Level 95 Applicant - Fixer, Minnaras Level 62 General - Adventurer, Venturi Level 25 Applicant - Adventurer.

While norms that structure the flow of the game and the interaction between players are found almost everywhere in the realm of multiplayer games and communities, failure to follow them is usually not as serious an offense as failure to follow the norm of reciprocity, for example.

In addition to the three common types of norms and rules presented above, there were several other types of norms and rules evident in the data of the study. For example, one interviewee's multiplayer community had a rule stating that fellow members' face-to-face identities should not be revealed even if one knew them:

> "In those communities there is a rule that no-one speaks of a screen name with their real name. But then again if you go to the player's own home page, you can tell your real name if you want to. But it is like an unwritten rule that you shouldn't reveal a person who chooses to hide behind a screen name. […] those members who are more active and who are prepared to come to meetings and so on, they don't want to stay anonymous. But there are indeed pretty many of those who don't reveal their true identity in any way."
> (Interviewee M)

Another example of a set of rules was an honor code of a guild of knights in a Fantasy setting MUD. Such sets of norms and rules can be truly demanding and multi-faceted. Furthermore, sets of norms and rules matter not only to those inside the community, but they can also work as a signal to those on the outside of the values and goals of the community:

> "[…] there's like a real honor-code, what you can do and what you can't do. Like help those who are weaker, and don't swear or lie and so forth. And if you are defending another player and the monster hits you really hard, you should shout to the other one that he should run away, and then you should stay there instead of running away, and, well, it's very dishonorable if you leg it and the monster kills the friend you were defending. You definitely don't want to let that happen. Then there are these rules that create in a way, they are like a part of the image of the guild or so. Those knights wouldn't be real knights if they didn't have such, and it has to do with the role-playing aspect as well."
> (Interviewee J)

**Punishing transgression**

Norms and rules not only present guidelines for appropriate behavior, but they also inherently include the idea of punishing transgression. A norm that is not followed or a rule without the means to implement it are empty, void of actual meaning. There are many overlapping control systems evident in most

multiplayer games. Typically, when a person breaks the general norms and rules of a multiplayer game there are consequences instituted by the game's officials, for example developers, administrators or people appointed specifically for this position. Sometimes there are consequences acted out by the larger society within the game. Individual multiplayer communities might also have to deal with transgressions in their own way, without outside help.

Most multiplayer games have some officials who supervise the flow of the game in general. These people can come from the company that is running the game, they might be the game's developers (such as in many MUDs) or they might be volunteers acting as administrators, for example. Due to the nature of typical software coding conventions, the power these people have over the game is just about absolute. For example, they can ban people from participating or limit their possibilities within the game; a serious offender might even be turned into a frog for the time being (Reid, 1999).

> "First of all it's one character per player and you shouldn't break the rules and, and if you do break them you can be removed or they can ban your IP address and so on. And if you find a bug in this game and you somehow benefit from it and you don't report it, that can be really bad. Like what happened to me in Realms MUD (laughs), because I didn't immediately understand that it was some kind of a bug, it was like an item that was a little bit too good to be true, and, well I should have figured it out that it didn't function like it was supposed to. And then there came this one wizard and gave a little speech to me about it (laughs)."
> (Interviewee J)

Because of the scope of typical multiplayer games, officials cannot oversee every action that takes place. Therefore, there are often means through which individual players can report misbehavior to the officials:

> "Yeah, you could telltale about another player to a bigger boss who could then throw, well, there was such a prison where you could throw a character, and it was really boring there because you couldn't do much before you had served your time."
> (Interviewee C)

It is typical, then, that an individual player has very limited means of punishing those who offend him or her within the game. A classic example often cited is that of one player abusing others in horrific ways within a virtual world called JennyMUSH, as presented by Dibbel (1998[29]). The gist of the story is that individual players without administrative powers sometimes have very little they can do against anyone who wishes to offend against them. In the case described by Dibbel, it required the actions of a wizard (administrator) to stop the offender. After this, the players' society at large took vengeance on the offender in the form of public humiliation that had a retributive dimension to it. The story goes on to illustrate how the game's developers then proceeded to introduce a stricter policy on participation and better means for individual players to control each others' behavior, including gagging, that is, a means to

[29] The 1998 text is a revised version; the original story was published in 1993.

block out the messages and indeed the whole virtual manifestation of another player. Indeed, when one looks at many of the contemporary multiplayer games one can see traces of such early experiences and decisions, resulting in systems that enable control with pinpoint accuracy. What has not changed, however, is that the power to punish offenders in concrete ways is still typically possessed by only a few actors, limiting the possibilities individual players have.

In addition to the official level of punishment, another level of punishment operates when individual players enforce the norms and rules. Because of their limited administrative power, measures such as ending a player's account with the game are out of the question for individuals. Instead, rank and file players have to resort to other means of punishing transgression, the most powerful and ubiquitous being denying the violator the benefits of belonging to a social aggregate by debarring. This can take place both within the larger society of players, or more effectively within a specific multiplayer community.

An example of a typical transgression of group norms that occurred in Anarchy Online took place when I was participating in an ad-hoc group that included both outsiders and members from my own community. The goal of this particular ad-hoc group was to enter a particular place within the game world in order to gain both experience and useful items. Of specific importance was one item, a sword that one of the group member's characters needed. The sword was a so-called "one-drop", meaning an item that can only be picked up once, and is thus forever bound to the character that touches it first. The whole group agreed on the goal of retrieving the sword, and also agreed on a specific code of conduct that would make sure that the right character picked it up. During the course of the mission, one member of the group called "Shonuf" was constantly bickering about the way the other players in the group played. Despite the tension this caused, the group managed to fell the monster that was carrying the sword after nearly one hour's play. Instead of following the mutually agreed rules, however, "Shonup" suddenly grabbed the sword from before everyone's eyes, leaving the baffled group members to curse him:

23:48: [Team] Hedeon: wtf Shonup
23:48: [Team] Groo: right...one was okay, second also but the third?
23:49: [Team] Shonup: its nuthing against u on that gimp healer
23:49: [Team] Groo: thanks
23:49: [Team] Hedeon: why the hell did you loot the styg [the name of the sword]?
23:49: [Team] Moluk: shonup you can not even use the sword
23:49: [Team] Moluk: you could have let it be

[Here Shonup suddenly leaves the group and logs off.]

23:53: [Team] Hedeon: well that ended in the shit can
23:53: [Team] Hedeon: shithead Shonup. Grrr
23:54: [Team] Groo: well, this has definitely not been my day:( sorry
23:54: [Team] Groo: My second time outside SL [Shadow Lands, an area within the game-world]

23:54: [Team] Groo: Have to learn some more...
23:54: [Team] Moluk: i cant belive he took the sword
23:54: [Team] Hedeon: not you fault, mate. You just gotta get used to the power healing thing
23:54: [Team] Groo: yup
23:54: [Team] Hedeon: same here, mate

My feelings about this incident as a player, and most probably the feelings of the other players present (especially the player who had lost the chance to obtain the item we were after), were so strong that I would never have teamed up with the misbehaving player's character if I had met him or her later on in the game. Such incidents, while not being particularly common, nevertheless occurred often enough to be a typical part of the folklore within the game. The incident is similar to something Jakobsson and Taylor described in the context of another MMOG (2003). Their conclusion was that while such behavior can yield short-term benefits to the transgressor, the long-term consequences of such actions can be dire. In games where one cannot truly succeed without cooperation with other players, a bad reputation circulating in the grapevine can cause serious harm. I am inclined to agree with this analysis, even though there are several limitations to such use of peer pressure as a controlling device among the greater society of players of a multiplayer game. First of all, even though the incident had really shaken me, I ended up not talking about it to anyone afterwards; moving on and playing my own game were more important than reminiscing about bad incidents. Secondly, in a game where there are thousands of players, it is possible that one will never meet the misbehaving character, or even the player, again. In smaller games and in smaller communities numbering perhaps dozens or hundreds of players such forms of socially exerted control can be more effective.

Across the scope of multiplayer games there are similar examples of players gaining unfair advantage over other players by misbehaving or cheating. For example, around typical FPS games there is a discourse of cheating with the help of external programs or other similar means. Punishing these kinds of transgressions follows the same lines as in the examples presented above. There is the official level of punishment typically acted out by various administrators, game companies, or tournament organizers, and then there is the unofficial level of social control within the gaming community at large, evident in reputation traveling along the grapevine:

> "Well yeah, there is always someone who says that there is a cheater on this or that server. […] Of course we mention if someone talks about cheating or so. Mostly we talk about who has been cheated. It's a bit like if you once get caught, you won't get away from it without changing your name."
> (Interviewee F)

Another way players without administrative powers can punish those who offend established norms and rules is through a sort of law of the mob whereby groups hold together and help each other out:

> ”Yes, yes, In Diablo you can like one-sidedly put hostiles on as they say and then go out to squash other players. I just have, well, we have such a system that if a big guy comes to bully smaller guys, there is always some friend with still a little bit bigger character in storage. We just call for that person to come there, like that here’s a troublemaker, and then he comes and kills the bully a couple of times or as long as it takes to make him leave. Just last night I was doing that myself (laughs) in Diablo. One guy came to bully some players with one third of his levels, so I just went and got an even bigger dude and killed him so many times that he left the game. Then I got my original character back and everyone was like thank you! (laughs) Thank you for getting rid of him.”
> (Interviewee J)

In conclusion it seems that there are many norms and rules both within multiplayer games in general and multiplayer communities in particular that govern the actions of players. In addition, there seems to be some interesting tension about how such rules are enforced. Often, the officials and appointed administrators of multiplayer games have near unlimited power to punish offenders, while normal players can only resort to group justice or the law of the mob when enforcing rules. At the same time, even the officials’ power is often limited because of the fundamentally anonymous nature of the computer networks where these games operate. A player playing a free game and connecting from an ever-changing IP address has little to lose: even if he or she is ejected from the game, logging in with a different user name is a simple procedure.

The way around the issue of anonymity is through giving players something to lose. Whether it is the experience their character has accumulated during hundreds of hours spent playing, the benefits stemming from membership in a multiplayer community, or an established place and reputation within the social fabric of the network, the prospect of potentially losing something valuable can be seen as a way of enforcing compliance to norms and rules.

### 6.5.2 Cohesiveness out of ritual and story

As we have seen so far, for a community to emerge there needs to be some kind of a shared concept or understanding of the general purpose of the community. The community process, however, does not stop once such a shared understanding is reached. For example, a community’s values and goals are not something that can be set in stone after they once have been established. They have to be re-negotiated and reaffirmed through constant input. Without constant reminders of for example the community’s goals, activities, and the role and significance of each individual member, strong commitment from members is difficult to retain (Wilson, 1973: 321). How well the community succeeds in negotiating a shared understanding and establishing a symbolic community is reflected in its cohesiveness, shared group consciousness, and the feelings of community that the members experience. While every aspect within

chapter six can be seen as contributing to these ends, the current section discusses especially the use of ritualistic communication and story-telling as a means to construct a shared symbolic communality.

Both ritualistic communication and sharing stories require shared meanings. They are powerful meaning-negotiating and transmitting devices for a community. Rituals and stories are also connected at certain points. For example, the kinds of roles and dramatic structure that can be important for a story can be equally important for a ritual. Besides, some stories within communities can be told in an almost ritualistic manner. These connections are significant enough to warrant including discussion of both angles in one section, but nevertheless it also makes sense to cover both angles separately.

Over the next few pages I shall discuss examples of ritualistic communication and story-telling in multiplayer communities in greater detail. I will start with rituals, and then move on to story-telling.

**Ritualistic communication**

To see communities as continuous social processes helps us to understand the importance that ritualistic communication has within them. From a ritualistic point of view, communication is not only aimed at negotiating meanings or learning something new. Rather, communication serves as a means to validate an already existing concept of the state of things. The highest function communication can have from a ritualistic point of view is to create and maintain organized, meaningful social and cultural realities. By engaging in ritualistic communication, individuals *perform* something that is shared, for example beliefs. A common archetype of a ritual is a ceremony that increases the communality of people and binds them together, such as a wedding. As Cohen (1989: 50) has asserted, "*…both in its social and psychological consequences, ritual confirms and strengthens social identity and people's sense of social location: it is an important means through which people experience community.*"

Ritualistic communication is typically full of symbols that can only truly be understood by those embedded within the symbolic system of the community. To an outside observer such communication can appear as irrational and meaningless. Incapable of understanding what the ritual is about, the outsider remains on the outside, thus strengthening the division between those within the community and those outside it. This means that while one can easily join a community, simply belonging to it is no guarantee that one can understand everything that happens within its scope:

> "[…] a couple of days ago when I was hooking a friend up with the free trial [of a MMOG], I think it was like at three or four in the night. Well, we went down town and there was this clan Lion's Mane, there came a long line of cats from one direction. I saw that they all belonged to the Lion's Mane, and they had some [a certain pet a character can have in the game] around them, as if guarding them. It was some sort of a weird procession, but I don't know at all what it was about. LabRat [a friend of the interviewee who had earlier belonged to the same community with him] is still in

> the Lion's Mane, and he didn't know anything about it either when I asked. So it's a mystery."
> (Interviewee B)

During the analysis it became clear that at least in the data of this study, actual established rituals were not very common in the sphere of multiplayer communities. Still, there were numerous instances where the communication behavior of players could only really be understood from a ritualistic viewpoint. Consequently it seems that the kinds of situations where ritualistic communication can be found in multiplayer communities might not always be as grandiose and clear-cut as those stereotypical rituals that serve as an embodiment of the term ritual, such as weddings and funerals. This could be explained by the fact that the kinds of established rituals evident in other contexts of social life have had a much longer time to develop. In many cases, the ritualistic communication evident in the data gave the impression of being new and only just developing, like many of the multiplayer communities themselves. For this reason the impact of emerging rituals on the community process can easily be underestimated now, both by researchers and by actual community members.

There were two specific types of rituals within the data. These were rituals of celebration and ritualistically organized periodic meetings between community members. Interestingly enough there were examples in the data of both kinds of rituals taking place in a face-to-face context as well as a CMC context. Here, though, we will concentrate on the realm of computer-mediated communication.

The most common type of ritual of celebration found in the data was a celebration of a successful community effort, such as winning an important game against a rival community. Because of their relation to task-oriented activities, these rituals were especially visible in communities that included a heavy competitive element. In the next excerpt, a member of a competitive multiplayer community describes their typical ritual of celebration, where they utilize the possibilities granted by VoIP:

> Interviewee K: "[…] then when everything goes well, people start to sing (laughs). It sounds really amusing when eight guys are singing simultaneously, all out of tune"
> Interviewer: "(laughs) Do you have like a shared song or something?"
> Interviewee K: "No, everybody just starts, might start to sing some hit song from the radio or something like that. It is really nice because it also relaxes the atmosphere […]"

Rituals of celebration can also take other forms, such as joining in a disco operating in the game world. For example, the grand society of Anarchy Online celebrated the birthday of the game during the period of my participant observation. Hundreds of players joined in, guided by a radio broadcast transmitted via the Internet. Dancing and games took place, and most characters, including mine, were seen wearing something festive and extraordinary, as seen in Figure 6.

From the viewpoint of this study, this event was made especially interesting by the way that participation in it was a community effort. For example, I did not just go to the place where the party took place by myself, but rather coordinated my actions with fellow members so that as many of us as possible were in the same place at the same time, making our characters dance to the same tune. While this sort of incident occurred only once during the period of participant observation, there was certainly potential for a ritual to develop there. Indeed, Anarchy Online, much like many other MMOGs, not only celebrates the birthday of the game but also introduces events from outside the game into the game world, such as holidays.

Ritualistically organized periodic meetings between community members are also typical of multiplayer communities. They can take place at fixed times, such as once a week or once a month, or occur whenever needed, such as on the eve of an important gaming event. These meetings can be seen as places for the members of multiplayer communities to reaffirm their commitment to the community and express their beliefs, values, and norms. These kind of repetitive situations can be seen as *rites of intensification*, as they have been called in face-to-face communities (Wilson, 1973: 320).


FIGURE 6 Celebrating the birthday of Anarchy Online

As we remember from chapter five, the one factor connected to traditional definitions of community that has received most critique within the discourse of online communities is that of geographical proximity. Indeed, the idea of small, local communities such as a group of families living near to one another seems to be the exact opposite of the kinds of loose, geographically dispersed networks of people that are included in the topic of this study. On the other hand, it has been asserted that online communities do identify with some kind of a space, whether it is a virtual space or not (see e.g. Smith, 1993; Saastamoinen 2001). There were several examples in the data of a virtual space being of consequence especially for periodic meetings. For example, when communities operating in MMOG games organize meetings, it is typical for the players to gather their characters into the same space within the gameworld. At first glance, since most of the communication between the players might still take place within the community chat channel or a VoIP application, for example, gathering the characters into the same place might seem unnecessary. That, however, is often not the case. The possibility of simultaneously utilizing the various communication modes within the game, including nonverbal communication possibilities through character movement and placement, can serve to enhance the multimodality of the situation. Furthermore, bringing the characters to the same place can be important for the sense of togetherness players experience (Durlach & Slater, 2000).

In addition to a sense of togetherness, gathering characters in the same place allows for the use of nonverbal cues in a way that differs sometimes significantly from text chat alone. For example, one interviewee playing a MMO-game described how in his community's periodic meetings, turn-taking was organized through a combination of VoIP and characters' nonverbal gestures:

> Interviewer: "Or do you regulate somehow who gets to speak?"
> Interviewee G: "That depends."
> Interviewer: "I mean, if eight people speak at the same time, or even more?"
> Interviewee G: "When there are not many people online we team and chat in org channel. When lots of people are online we switch to team channels. Then we have this org meeting, where you rise your hand to receive voice. You must stand to talk, and the rest have to sit, even me. I deal voices out."
> Interviewer: "Did you come up with it yourselves?"
> Interviewee G: "Yep. Simple and easy. We sit in special order as well. Close to me are the backbone and in the middle members. Kind of a protective feeling for them (laughs). I sit higher than the rest, then come my generals and the floor is for the rest."

Figure 7 shows a typical community meeting taking place in Anarchy Online. Despite their potential for enhancing cohesion within the community, it is not always necessary to have members attending such meetings. Indeed, sometimes it is only the inner circle that is regularly present at the meetings, while other, less committed members choose to pass. On the other hand, it might be difficult


FIGURE 7 A periodical community meeting in Anarchy Online

to gather the whole population of the community in the same place. For example, members might be dispersed geographically over various time zones, as was the case in both Alpha and Beta.

**Cooperative story-telling**

As we have already seen, not all networks of ties can be seen as communities. A community needs its members to *share* at least some sort of ideological foundation, an understanding of what the community is about (Beniger, 1986). Here, sharing does not refer only to individuals having similar ideas, but rather it includes the concept of an active communicative process in which community members take part. It is not enough to have a shared understanding of what the community is about, but one also has to be able to perceive that the other members share that understanding.

One approach to the process of negotiating a shared understanding is cooperative story-telling, or a dramatic view of sharing stories (see e.g. Bormann, 1986: 135–136; Littlejohn, 1999: 167–170). The basic idea behind a dramatic view of sharing stories is that many of our images of reality consist of narratives of how things are believed to be, and that such stories are created and shared through symbolic interaction. Briefly, people are social story-tellers who construct their existence through stories. In the context of communities, story-telling can be used to introduce new members to the community, to

strengthen the existing values and operations models, and to clarify the ideology of the community, for example (see e.g. Meyer, 1995).

A dramatic view proposes that by looking at the stories community members tell, we can see meanings, feelings, and motives behind them. Story-telling was evident in the data of this study on many levels. The interviewees' accounts can be seen as stories in themselves, and they included examples of story-telling taking place in the community, for example during a ritual of celebration when the members came together to go through the story of a victory over and over again. The participant observation data included many story-like elements as well, such as when community members reminisced together about past events. Some of the stories evident in the data were told once only, others time and time again.

The kind of story-telling evident in multiplayer communities is typically cooperative. This can be seen for example in the tendency to engage in reciprocal self-disclosure, something that is connected to the norms of reciprocity discussed in sub-section 6.5.1. Even though by no means a necessity, self-disclosure is usually seen as a process that benefits from reciprocity, since sharing personal information encourages others to tell their stories as well. This kind of behavior is evident in multiplayer communities, where one person's confession sometimes triggers similar responses from many other people:

> [Team] Ilona: I need coffee
> [Team] Ilona: grabbing some
> [Team] Ilona: Morning
> [Team] Groo: heh, it's almost four pm here
> [Team] Ilona: where are you? UK?
> [Team] Groo: Finland
> [Team] Bandstrong: 8 am here
> [Team] Groo: USA?
> [Team] Ilona: It's stupid early here..lol
> [Team] Bandstrong: yeah Kentucky
>
> Colawer: I'm going to my parents for dinner
> Riciah: That's good Col :))
> Colawer: You have no idea.
> Colawer: after all the chicken I burn
> Riciah: LOL
> Riciah: Wish my boy would come by

The act of reciprocal self-disclosure is an important part of the development of dyadic relationships that operate through CMC (see e.g. Valo, 2003). It seems to be equally important in a multiplayer community context, as it complies with the norms of reciprocity, enables means for establishing identities, and fulfils the function of cooperative story-telling that can enhance the feeling of community.

Both ritualistic communication and story-telling events engage the participants on a very collective level, since they require a certain amount of cooperation. The viewpoint adopted here towards rituals and stories is

relatively broad, and is based on the principle that they do not always need to have the same content. For example, community members might tell each other jokes. Naturally, the actual content of these jokes will differ from one time to another. Still, the fact that it is the same people over and over again who are telling the jokes creates a new meaning for them. It is the *act* of participating in a ritual or engaging in a story-telling event that matters. For example, it was typical for both Alpha and Beta that members engaged in light-hearted, humorous conversations on the community chat channel. The next excerpt illustrates such a story-telling event taking place on the chat channel of Beta. After logging in, I automatically typed in a command that would make the community bot[30] named "Wald" present me with various kinds of information, such as who was online at the time. To my surprise the bot did not answer. Rather, I got answered by some other community members, after which we engaged in a short and humorous exchange of words:

> Groo: online all
> ["Wald" does not answer.]
>
> Rays: 3 online as far as i know ...:)
> Groo: ah, ok
> Rays: I'm here :)
> Groo: Wald is quiet
> Rays: He sleeping
> Groo: :)
> Bladescream: Someone killed him. We had a beautiful service for him.
> Rays: I cried
> Bladescream: She did.
> Rays: a lot
> Bladescream: A whole lot
> Groo: how can it be? I´m away for some hours and the whole place is a mess! Sheesh (shakes head in disbelief)
> Rays: a lot a lot a lot a lot....*cries some more*
> Groo: Aww now, don´t cry
> Bladescream: See? Look what you made her do.
> Groo: I´m sure he´s in a better place
> Rays: .....*sniff*.....pfff
> Groo: where people don´t bother him with all kinds of requests all the time.
> Bladescream: I really doubt buried in a shallow grave is a better place.
> Groo: pfff?
> Rays: lmao [laughing my ass off]
> Groo: did you just sneeze?
> Rays: no pfff....I....its hard to explain lol

Cooperative story-telling can result in the convergence of the participants' ideas and views. Such convergence, in turn, can result in the emergence of a rhetorical vision. Sharing a rhetorical vision means that the participants' view of

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30 Essentially a piece of software that was monitoring the game and the community's members and could be used to gain various kinds of information.

certain things becomes unified. Such a vision helps to bring people together and give them a sense of identification with a shared reality. Indeed, the existence of shared rhetorical visions can be seen as evidence that convergence has taken place (Littlejohn, 1999: 168). Rhetorical vision should not be seen as one entire story, but rather as a construct consisting of associated story themes. Both Alpha and Beta, for example, included a rhetorical vision of the community being a place for fun-loving, sociable players who wanted to avoid competitive playing. In addition, Beta's rhetorical vision included elements that stressed its difference from Alpha, especially with regards to issues of leadership. This was apparent from the very beginning of Beta. In its first days and weeks, Beta was still in many ways connected to its past through members who had belonged to Alpha. Many of these members felt that they had been let down by the leader of Alpha, and they wanted to explicitly emphasize their distance from the earlier leader. The next excerpt shows some former members of Alpha making fun of one of the new leaders of Beta. Through such fun-making, the community members and the new leader constructed an image of Beta being somehow fundamentally different from Alpha, especially that the leadership in Beta would not be as authoritative as that in its predecessor:

Leya: yeah so Colitris is the boss now we have to ask him about everything
Leya: COLITRIS DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO KILL ANOTHER BEIT [a small creature typically encountered in the early game]?
Coloren: Come to aban
Coloren: Yes Leya :)
Shepis: And kiss his feet when we see him
Alandir: LOL
[…]
Coloren: DO NOT!
Leya: but you are the boss now Cooly
Leya: You have to get use to that
Coloren: ok...
Groo: ah! Thank you:)

[At this point in the conversation I had met up with one of the founding members of Beta, who had then accepted me as a member.]

Coloren: did you kiss Camos feet?
Leya: welcome Groo welcome home
Groo: thanks, it sure feels like it
Spiritinker: lol
Spiritinker: ORG is back on wheels :)
Coloren: lol
Leya: welcome to the friendliest org ever
Coloren: :)
Colex: welcome groo
Groo: :)
Shepis: Hello Groo
Spiritinker: yep, it is our ORG :-)
Spiritinker: and welcome :-) Froo :)

Coloren: Exactly :)
Coloren: I'm not going to "pull a Camo"

[This remark refers to the name of the main character of the leader of Alpha. "Pulling a Camo" refers to the way the leader of Alpha had single-handedly disbanded the community.]

Alpha was still the topic of some conversations later on. In fact, there was a particularly good example of the emergence of a fantasy theme when a new member of Beta became intrigued by the constant references to Alpha and asked members who had belonged to it why they had left their previous community. The answer took the form of collective story-telling, where the members not only answered the question they were asked, but also expressed the idea that Beta was somehow fundamentally different than Alpha. In effect, they were expressing their common belief in the community effort that had just begun:

Truadeven: Why did you all leave [Alpha]?
[…]
Leya: [Alpha] was dispand by its leader wasnt our choise
Colitris: Yeah
Colitris: A guy named Camo just decied to break up the org
Colitris: If it was me, I'd have given leader to someone else and left the org.
Colitris: but he decied to disband it
[…]
Alandir: yupps - that is how it should have been done..
Leya: well if that made him feel good thats ok :)
Alandir: :))
Colitris: He had a kinda power trip going :)
[…]
Colitris: Made him feel powerful to "I command this be done!"
Leya: lol
Truadeven: why?
Colitris: Beats me... that just how he was :)
[…]
Colitris: You should have seen his login message
Leya: He was abit grumpy sometimes :)
Leya: like an old man (verry old)
Truadeven: lol
Leya: and be careful I am an old lady a verry old lady
Colitris: "Camo steps onto Rubi ka ... my kindom come, me will be done.... blaw blaw blaw
Leya: just drop that Camo now And hope not too many put to much money in the bank:)
Colitris: lol

Although some other members later on presented a slightly less black-and-white picture of what happened, this particular fantasy theme thrived for at least the first month or so of the new community's existence.

In conclusion, cooperative story-telling can help members of a community to negotiate a shared understanding. By sharing fantasies and engaging in ritualistic communication community members construct an image of the community. Construction of such a symbolic community is a long-term process. If successful, it contributes to the cohesion of the community and helps to create a shared feeling of community.

## 6.6 One day it all fell apart - multiplayer communities disbanding

### 6.6.1 Conflicts in multiplayer communities

It is inevitable that when a large number of individuals come together for a long period of time and interact with each other frequently there is potential for conflict. In processes such as multiplayer communities, there are many possible causes of conflict: the individual differences of members, misunderstandings, varying motives and countless other factors.

On a general level, both the observation and interview data showed that the context of multiplayer games can be ripe with conflict potential. This potential derives from a number of sources, such as the game's mechanics pitting players against each other and encouraging conflicts between them, and players having generally differing motivations for play, for example in the form of varying ideas of what kind of gaming is "fun". An example of the former kind is the way many multiplayer games, including MMOGs such as Anarchy Online, include incentives for players to divide into large opposing camps. In Anarchy Online, one of the first decisions a new player encountered when creating a character was to choose a side in the large, story-driven conflict taking place in the game world. There were three sides to choose from, two of them representing hostile camps and the third one trying to be in the middle. While such choices do not necessarily limit players' behavior at every step, they can have an effect on the game play. For example, each camp or faction had its own cities in the game world. Characters belonging to enemy factions could enter these cities at great risk only. The result of this was that more often than not I found myself teaming up with characters belonging to the same faction as my character did, just because it was easier to do so. Such a division into "us" and "them" can be seen as contributing to the overall tension and excitement of the game, while also serving the added benefit of enforcing intergroup cohesion.

Differing motivations and approaches to gaming are another common source of conflicts in multiplayer games. A typical example of this kind of conflict potential is so-called powerplayers - players who enjoy a competitive and in many ways task-driven approach to gaming, a viewpoint not understood by other players who have a less competitive approach (Taylor,

2003b). Another typical example of varying individual motivations is the existence of cheating in its many forms, an activity that clearly divides the general multiplayer gaming community. Overall, then, conflicts are not a rarity in the context of multiplayer games. Indeed, earlier research has shown that especially in some types of multiplayer games, such as competitively played FPS games, conflict talk can be one of the most common types of talk (Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2002).

On the other hand, while the general potential for conflict in multiplayer games seemed to be high, actual examples of conflicts within multiplayer communities were hard to find in either data set. For example, during my year of participant observation I experienced only a few conflicts within the communities I belonged to, and those few were mostly solved in a swift and friendly manner. On the other hand, of the few conflicts that arose, some were very serious and could even be seen as contributing to the decline of the community process. The interview data yielded similar results.

The overall impression was that either there were not many conflicts in the interviewees'communities or they were too insignificant to remember. One way of explaining this is many players' approach to multiplayer gaming: it may be that when the whole context is voluntary and about having fun, conflicts simply do not arise as often:

> "Yeah, we had relatively few problems or fights there, everybody was usually in a good mood when they came to play, and our goals were not set that high. Other than having fun and being together."
> (Interviewee H)

Despite their relative rarity, practically all interviewees did mention at least some occasions that could be labeled as conflicts, some of which had proven fatal to their multiplayer communities. For example, large differences in members' motives had at times led to the disbanding of the whole community or its division into two smaller multiplayer communities.

There were three specific kinds of conflicts evident in the data that warrant further analysis. First, there were conflicts between multiplayer communities. Second, there were conflicts between individual members, and third, there were conflicts between individual members and the community. I shall now look at each case in turn.

**Conflicts between multiplayer communities**

It is common to find various forms of intergroup conflicts within the multiplayer gaming context. These kinds of conflicts are often promoted by the game's dynamics, for example in cases where the game pits multiple groups against each other in the pursuit of the same goal. The tension that competition and conflict between player groups can generate seems to be an essential part of why people play certain types of multiplayer games.

Typically, intergroup conflicts can be seen as a means of developing group identity through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. For example, a community's values and norms might be something that community members are not constantly aware of, but that surface in the face of conflict with another community that has differing values and goals. Through building an image of "the enemy" and "us" versus "them", the community can enhance their cohesion:

> "There were these, like full-on war guilds who were at war with two hundred other guilds. Basically so that everybody possible was their enemy. The idea behind that is that you can kill those who you are at war against and those who are PK, that is a player killer, or a red character. You get one murder to your account, and then when you have murdered enough people you become red yourself. Its mostly so that you can freely fight with others. There are such player-killer guilds there, too. All of them red characters."
> (Interviewee F)

Another example of a conflict between multiplayer communities was presented by an interviewee who described how the behavior of an individual member of another community provoked conflict between two communities:

> "Of course sometimes in matches there comes, like we had once such a situation that there was one player in the opposing team who was cheating. We noticed him because he was shooting through the walls, and of course that escalated then into a conflict between the clans."
> (Interviewee K)

**Conflicts between individual players**

In a long-term social network such as multiplayer communities, the mere presence of many individuals with varying backgrounds and goals can lead to conflict. Sometimes these conflicts expand and become known to the larger community system, sometimes they remain mostly between the two parties. The reasons for discord can be as varied as in any other context of human behavior. For example, varying orientations to gaming, envy, and rivalry are typical factors that bring about conflicts between individual players:

> "In one community I was once, well, they didn't dare to tell me that I couldn't play anymore. It got to the point that there came one guy to replace me, like to suddenly say that ok, you're out of here. Ok, then the leader of that community wouldn't tell me why for at least two months. He came up with lies such as that they had spoken with the whole community about me not being a good match. But at the point when I left, I said that ok, see you later, and half of the people came immediately to ask me personally what was the matter, and why I left. People really come up with lies to get rid of you and all that. The next thing was that they claimed that I had not been good enough. I went for fun to check some statistics on shots, because of course they had only looked at frags, and I was number one in most of them. Well, in the end it was

> clear that the new player just didn't like me for some reason, and because he was more famous than me I was dumped."
> (Interviewee N)

Another typical example of factors leading to conflicts between players is misunderstandings. The context of multiplayer computer games is as prone to misunderstandings as any other. While conflicts originating in misunderstandings are generally not as serious as conflicts based on differing values and goals, members of multiplayer communities are generally aware that there is a risk of a simple misunderstanding escalating into something more serious:

> "[…] in these clans you should always be right in a certain way. Because it is very easy to misunderstand people. It is so easy you wouldn't believe it. That's why we use the little faces [smileys]. But sometimes they are not enough. Sometimes they think that you have been a bit sarcastic or something like that, and they reply to you in a bad way. Then you reply again in a bad way and then it's going to come down in flames. Then some other people will come in and join the conversation. So after a while some people actually get banned from the forums, so that you can't actually post anymore. Of course you can do if you change the nick [online pseudonym] and join again, but they will see straight away who you are because they remember, they know the way you write. So you have to be careful. You tend to be a bit nicer than you are in real life because you know that you can be misunderstood. Even though you want to say … you are almost upset, you always have to be less upset (laughs)."
> (Interviewee F)

When a conflict occurs within a multiplayer community, regardless of its original cause, it often happens that the parties to the conflict are not left to solve it alone. Rather, every conflict is potentially a community issue, and a multiplayer community can also engage in a collective attempt to solve them. The next excerpt from a community channel illustrates how solving a conflict can be a group effort. The excerpt starts from a situation where one member is insulted by another one ignoring her (or him) during a group effort. The player who is being accused of the insulting behavior is trying to solve the problem, but it is the intrusion of other community members that really helps to move the situation along. In the end the misunderstanding is solved, much to the relief of all present:

> 23:31: Razielle: well Col, I dunno what got into you. You act very kind in org channel, but in team, you just ignore me. Not buying that, sorry. happy hunting
> […]
> 23:33: Colawer: Please Raz
> 23:33: Colawer: Give me another chance.
> 23:33: Razielle: nope sorry
> 23:34: Moluk: k
> 23:34: Colawer: ;(
> 23:34: Colawer: You didn't hear anything I chatted to you at all?
> 23:34: Colawer: ... sigh...
> 23:35: Colawer: well what can I do....

23:35: Dawnsword: I have teamed with col and he is the same as in org chat...
23:35: Dawnsword: cant shut him up normally!!
23:35: Colawer: ...
23:35: Colawer: I ...
23:35: Dawnsword: He must have been bugged not to chat!
23:35: Colawer: don't know what to say.
23:35: Atina: That is true, in a good way :)
23:35: Colawer: It HAD to be.
23:35: Colawer: It HAD to be a bug!
23:35: Colawer: I was trying to talk to her the WHOLE TIME!
23:36: Colawer: ...
23:36: Colawer: sigh...
23:36: Atina: Ok Col...just calm down my friend, we'll work this out
[…]
23:36: Colawer: well...
23:37: Colawer: I don know.
23:37: Atina: Things happen
23:37: Colawer: I gave it a shot... and lost.
23:37: Dawnsword: heh maybe she had you muted!!!
[…]
23:37: Atina: What ever
23:37: Atina: But I know this
23:38: Atina: Col would never purposedly ignore anyone, so something had to happen
23:38: Razielle: I think I accidentally hit ignore when I tried to recruit him in party, since we both pressed the recruit button at same time
23:38: Dawnsword: I know :)
23:38: Dawnsword: whoops, that would explain it!
23:38: Razielle: soo how can I undo this?
23:39: Colawer: plz plz come back
23:39: Colawer: you select me and type /mute
23:39: Colawer: it should undo
23:39: Dawnsword: reteam him and what he said!
23:39: Colawer: (if she can hear me)
23:39: Razielle: I can now...figured it out
23:39: Colawer: I don't know if she can.
23:39: Razielle: damn....so sorry Col
23:39: Razielle: how such a stupid misclick can screw up a partying ;(
23:40: Colawer: it's ok.
23:40: Dawnsword: life is full of little misunderstandings... its sticking with them that bad things happen
23:40: Atina: Forget it Raz, I know he will :)
23:40: Colawer: Will you come back?
23:40: Colawer: Forget what?
23:40: Razielle: on me way :D
23:40: Colawer: something in the past?
23:40: Dawnsword: So I reckon its hugs and forgets
23:40: Colawer: oh yes.
23:42: Colawer: :)
23:42: Dawnsword: Happy, happy, Joy, joy!

**Conflicts between individual members and the community**

Members of multiplayer communities can end up in conflict with their community because of contradictions between their individual values and goals and the community's values and goals. For example, multiplayer communities typically have norms concerning the level of commitment expected from members. These norms can be commonly accepted and acknowledged, but it is still likely that within the community there are varying interpretations of what it means to be truly committed. Such differences in interpretation of the norms can be a frequent source of friction, resentment, and even hostility within the community (Wilson, 1973: 305). In a way the underlying force in such cases is the dialectical tension between autonomy and inclusion.

Conflicts between individual members and the community as a whole are a further example of the way conflicts can also be seen as a means for the community to negotiate its underlying values and goals. They work also as a means through which individual community members negotiate their needs towards the whole community, for example by expressing how they think the community should operate or what it should be like:

> "[…] at some point there was a guy in [Alpha] who started to complain that I have given money to you folks and done this and that and I want to get now a leadership position. And of course no-one took him seriously, that, and it's not, it really didn't matter if you were a leader or not. Well, he wanted it anyway, and he threw such a last ultimatum to us that give me leadership or I will resign, and the rest of the members were just like okay, be my guest. Or they tried to keep him there in the beginning, like don't do this, that you can't be serious, lighten up, but it didn't work out, and he left in the end."
> (Interviewee B)

In conclusion, there can be a lot of conflict potential in multiplayer games. Serious conflicts within multiplayer communities are still relatively rare, and indeed members even deliberately try to avoid them. This can be the result of the relatively small size of most multiplayer communities and the cooperative nature of most multiplayer games. A player who insults other players or causes grief to them can soon find out that his or her options to proceed in the game have been exhausted. When a game cannot be won alone, keeping up one's social relations becomes a necessary part of the game.

In addition to those viewpoints to conflicts presented in this sub-section, we have already seen examples of typical conflicts in multiplayer communities in sub-section 6.5.1 with regards to transgression of norms and rules. All in all, conflicts can be seen as an instrumental part of the community process. For example, many of the phenomena of the community process discussed so far, such as values, goals, norms, and rules, are negotiated partly through conflicts. Indeed, it is often through conflicts that community members come to recognize their community's underlying norms.

Among the most serious types of conflicts a multiplayer community can encounter are those where the motives of key members and the motives of the

rest of the community fail to meet. Though not by any means the sole reason for multiplayer communities disbanding, friction between leadership and the rest of the community can be a serious threat to the life of a multiplayer community. This phenomenon is discussed in detail in the next sub-section.

### 6.6.2 When a multiplayer community falls apart

Multiplayer communities, like most other online communities, are characterized by their voluntariness. The context they operate in is characterized by continuous change and, as a result, a level of uncertainty. By definition, then, multiplayer communities should not be expected to be as long-lived as many other communities where factors such as geographical proximity and family ties can be seen as contributing to the longevity of the community process.

All but one of the interviewees had belonged to more than one multiplayer community during their online gaming history, and the one exception had been active in only one game seriously enough to be interested in communal efforts. One interviewee did not even remember all the communities he or she had belonged to, which underlines their very different nature when compared to a traditional community. Generally, then, a great many multiplayer communities are short-lived:

> ”Well, active clan activities are usually pretty short-lived. It is typically from a couple of months to half a year. And then they lose their activity, and people leave. But they also might stay and sort of haunt the place, that the community is not used but it still exists.”
> (Interviewee D)

This temporary nature of multiplayer communities has been observed for example in MMOGs where about one fifth of the communities present at any one time stop existing within a month (Williams et al., 2006). It might be that in those multiplaying contexts where competition is even more pronounced than in MMOGs, this multiplayer community “churn” (ibid.) might be even larger. As one interviewee with a background in competitive FPS games commented on the life-expectancy of an average gaming group:

> ”You can say that they are really short-lived. Or it depends a bit on how serious they are about the game. You can notice, like for example that [community] founded by my friend, they don’t take it too seriously and they have stayed alive for four-five-six years. Then there are these that are founded, stay alive for two weeks, lose their first match and stop right there and then when they notice that they are not invincible. Such communities [where the interviewee has belonged to] has been, I can’t even count them, I don’t know how many there has been. There’s also that, often if someone fails in an important match others might start to bitch him about it and then in the end it falls apart because of that. It really can be because of the smallest of reasons. They really aren’t the most stabile things. Often someone just leaves and then you get someone else to replace him. Or, well, there’s also that that do you count

> it as a falling apart if they just change their name. For example one clan changed their name every month or so. The same players, just the clan changing the name in search of sponsors. There's all kind of stuff like this out there."
> (Interviewee N)

On the other hand, the fact that many multiplayer communities were short lived does not mean that multiplayer communities cannot reach a mature age. For example, a community process can have a history of several years, meaning that the ties within the community have had time to develop in strength:

> "Honestly, I have met most of them [community members] face-to-face, and, well I think that I know them pretty well because they have mostly stayed the same. There are those in the [name of the community] who have stayed there for the whole four years. You do get to know them already in that time. It's like, there's one who just turned eighteen, which means that when he started he was fourteen (laughs). One really sees also such growth and development during that time. And I have also grown, I was also something like seventeen when I started. You can really say that I know them well, after all we do have that long history with most of them."
> (Interviewee K)

There may be several reasons behind the disbandment of a multiplayer community. For example, a community might lose its purpose if it has set itself clear goals and either reaches or fails to reach them but cannot negotiate new goals to replace them. Outside forces can also have an effect on the community process, for example in the form of a multiplayer game being discontinued. Multiplayer communities can also wither away because of members losing their interest in the game or the community or because of their changing life situations. It is also possible that conflicts within the community become too strong, forcing dramatic changes in the community process. Over the next pages we shall discuss further examples of the reasons that can lead to a multiplayer community being disbanded.

Voluntariness is an important background factor in multiplayer communities. This means that in the end, most multiplayer communities are heavily dependent on whether or not they are enjoyable to play in. They are essentially voluntary social aggregates in a context where people mostly want to have fun and enjoy themselves. Furthermore, enjoyability has been shown to be one of the key factors in experiencing a sense of community in a virtual setting such as multiplayer gaming (Koh & Kim, 2004).

Sometimes multiplayer communities are disbanded not because of anything to do with membership, but because of characteristics of the particular game that the community has evolved around. While some multiplayer games have remained popular from year to year, it is common for people to switch to newer games at some point:

> Interviewee H: "In my opinion it has happened almost without exceptions so that people just bail, that they start to send messages that they don't have time anymore. I have then interpreted that as lack of interest, perhaps something else has come instead. And usually I haven't thought that they have been overly bad experiences,

> because also you lose interest every once in a while in some game, and often it unfortunately also means that the interest is lost towards the community."
> Interviewer: "Okay. Have they been quick processes, have they even come as a surprise, or have you usually seen it coming?"
> Interviewee H: "You usually sense that it is going in that direction. Mostly it is because there seems to be less and less time for those activities, and that's the end of it then."

Another way a multiplayer community can end up being disbanded is when a gaming company stops supporting the game the community's operations are based around. In these cases it might be that there are still enough people interested in the game in the player base to keep up a vital community, but if the game is not there anymore there is little the community can do. There are also cases of multiplayer communities being formed around a game in development, just to be disbanded because the game was later cancelled. On the other hand, many multiplayer communities suffer little from such outside influences, continuing their operation in the context of another game. It is possible that survivability in the face of outside influences is connected to the strength of ties within the community. For example, if the community consists mostly of weak, specialized ties, taking away their main connecting factor and/or mode of communication might prove more serious than for networks of stronger ties, since the stronger ties are more likely to be connected through multimodal communication (see also Haythornthwaite, 2005).

From the viewpoint of social interaction within multiplayer communities, those cases of multiplayer communities disbanding are especially interesting where the reasons can be traced mainly to factors within the community's social network. Typically, these include conflicts either between individual members or between members and the general community. That conflicts are the cause of the disbandment does not mean that the community actually ends up in flames. Rather, it is equally possible that long-lasting, unsolvable conflicts lead to a slow withering away of the community:

> "Well, this is pretty easy because you have not met anyone face-to-face. You can, if there comes bad conflicts either the clan is split in two or into many parts, or in those cases when there's only one opposing all the others that one person gets kicked out. And the third option is that there comes such a big conflict that no-one comes online anymore, and then the clan just withers away and dies. One third of the members are left wondering where all the others are (laughs). I have witnessed one such a case from the side."
> (Interviewee A)

Even though conflicts of motives do not necessarily pose a threat to the community, such conflicts between the leadership and the rest of the community can lead to serious trouble within the community. Both the interviews and the observation data yielded many examples of the possibly destructive effects of such conflicts, especially where the conflict remains unresolved and the leader ends up leaving the community. For example, one interviewee painted an uncompromising, yet typical picture of such an incident:

> ”Usually that’s the end of it then. But you do see those cases where the leader leaves and someone else steps out of the line and continues from there. Sometimes you see that, but usually they are disbanded, they don’t recover from it anymore. And in that way the whole clan culminates in that one dude. Usually clans are known by their leaders.”
> (Interviewee F)

The participant observation data from Anarchy Online gives us another insight into the significance of conflicts of motive between the leadership and the rest of the community. In the case of Alpha, the disbandment of the community came swiftly and, at least for most of the members, without warning. In an interview with another member of the community I got some background information on what had taken place during the time I had been absent from the community and it had ceased to exist. It seemed that the leader of the community had, for reasons unknown to the others, lost his motivation to keep up the community. One of my fellow members also had another idea about the original problem: he proposed that the leader of Alpha wanted to try being a member in a more competitive and organized community:

> ”Yeah, [the leader of Alpha] really said then, or it was actually a fake reason, he said that ”I don’t have enough experience for this, and I could join in another community and get the experience and then come back”. You could tell straight away that that was only talk. He wanted a change, the sociability was not enough anymore and he wanted more raids and player-versus-player and such stuff. I do understand him, though, I wanted to experiment exactly those same things in the end when I had only a couple of weeks of the account left, I just wanted to experience it.”
> (Interviewee B)

Other members of Alpha had apparently tried to get the leader to reconsider or share the responsibilities of leadership, to no avail. When the community came to be disbanded, there was very little that could be done to limit the damage:

> Interviewee B: ”Yes, indeed when it broke down there were only a few people online. I also tried, I said to him [leader of Alpha] that he should keep the community alive at least for a short time that people could check the news. I think that Wald [the community bot] was just then online because [name of the leader of the follow-up community] was nowhere to be seen, and I think it was me holding up the guild bot at that time. I tried to make it so that whenever someone came online it shouted with big letters “read this”, because you were practically forced to read the news. But it wasn’t then…”
> Interviewer: ”Yeah, and when people are having a break of a couple of days there…”
> Interviewee B: ”Yes, exactly, one couldn’t do anything anymore.”

In conclusion, multiplayer communities can be disbanded for a variety of reasons, not all of which have the drama of conflicts. In general, though, it seems that of all the relevant factors, it is the commitment of the leader that is especially relevant for the well-being of the community. While some

multiplayer communities can survive the loss of their leader, for many a multiplayer community such an event can be a death sentence:

> ”Usually it happens that the leader loses his interest in it because it is a relatively hard job in the end to run such a clan. He loses his interest and doesn't have the energy to get more matches. And of course people still want to play, and they start to complain that “why aren't we playing”, and then if he answers that he's not interested in getting any or something else like that, people just start to leave one by one. That is the most common way. That the leader can't take it anymore.”
> (Interviewee K)

### 6.6.3 …another community is born out of the ashes

This sub-section closes the metaphorical circle of the multiplayer community process and returns us to a place similar to where we started from in sub-section 6.2.1 “The birth of a multiplayer community”. As we have already seen, a typical multiplayer community experiences many changes during its life cycle, and many gaming groups on the verge of becoming communities never make it before disbandment.

When a multiplayer community's members experience severe conflicts of motive, or when the community is disbanded, the community process can take on a new turn. Such events can result in the creation of new multiplayer communities, as evident in the next two excerpts from the same interviewee:

> “Well, one clan was disbanded because there were like two leader types, two of the founding members. It was this [name of a community] where I was also one of the founding members. They got into a huge argument over what to do next, whether to take more people in and what to play and so forth. So they disbanded that clan then and founded two new ones. One of them was [name of a community], they are nowadays playing Day of Defeat and every once in a while Counter Strike, and the other one was [name of a community] and, it was really good, among the top ten. But they have all but stopped their operations as well.”
> (Interviewee K)

> ”I play to win, but if I lose I don't take it so hard. And, in a way my competitiveness is not as serious as some other people's. We had this one clan [name of a clan] that was disbanded because there was a small group inside who wanted really badly to win, and of course it then happened that they built their own clan and started to play by themselves. They have fared pretty well […] they are somewhere among the best hundred clans. They are doing well, but I don't know how much fun it is to play in such a clan where competition is everything.”
> (Interviewee K)

There are accounts of similar incidents in other contexts of online communities as well, where periods of intense conflict result in the disbandment of the community. For example, Danet (2001: 245) describes an IRC-based community, where conflicts between the operators resulted in some of the operators leaving and founding a new community. The story goes that many of the members of

the original community followed them into the new community, something that was also evident in the data of this study.

From a process viewpoint it is not necessary to see communities created in this way as totally new entities. Rather they can be seen as being connected to or as extensions of the original community process. Furthermore, as the second excerpt of (Interviewee K) above demonstrated, such spawning of a new community does not necessarily spell doom for the original community. Instead, even such dramatic events in a community's life cycle can serve an important function. After all, events such as intense conflicts can serve as a means of negotiating the community's values and goals afresh, something that can end up in the strengthening of the original community.

The kinds of events that can lead to the disbandment of a multiplayer community do not necessarily occur instantaneously. Rather, they can have a lengthy period of preparation behind them. After the seeds of discord start to grow in the community, some of the members can be found engaged in discussion concerning the state of the community. They may do this through private communication channels, hidden from the eyes and ears of their fellow members. Such discussion, then, can serve as a key factor in the process of a new community emerging from an old one:

> "Well, they are disbanded so that people have been discussing for example privately or then on a small channel, because it is common that people join smaller channels that have to do with whatever, hobbies or nicknames or something. And on these channels they have then talked in a more detailed way about this, wondered about the behavior of some people in the clan, for example what they like, what they don't like and how long they think they have the strength to go on and what they want out of it. And then they are disbanded so that a couple of people decide to either leave for another clan or found a new one. From our clan there has left, well, we had about twenty members around midsummer, and there left like a whole new clan out of us. It was because they had a totally, they wanted to play a different game than us."
> (Interviewee A)

The disbandment of Beta followed a similar pattern to the one presented above. Although I did not know it when I stopped the participant observation, Beta then had only a few weeks to live. Towards the end of its existence, Beta had adopted a slightly more centralized model of leadership. Apparently friction had evolved between this central leader and some other members of the community. The fellow community member whom I interviewed some weeks afterwards was one of the key figures in the events, as he became the leader of a community that succeeded Beta:

> Interviewee G: "Then it began to get ill in the [Beta]."
> Interviewer: "Tell me about that. Because I didn't play enough at that time, I didn't notice anything."
> Interviewee G: "I was fairly known by players, people liked me as it turned out."
> Interviewer: "Yes, I remember you teaching me!"
> Interviewee G: "As I was very thankful to [Beta] for all the help I got from it, I tried to reanimate it. But people were not supportive towards their president, [name of the

> leader of Beta]. One sad day I got a private message saying, [name] start your own org and I will join. That was the moment! Yeah, [name of the leader of Beta] once left our org to do an aliens raid, I hate it when a president leaves org for a stupid reason such as better items from some stupid raid. After that it went down hill. Then another PM with the same message. Man, I was thinking, me as a president of an org? So many responsibilities! And I was not that good yet. But the backbone of our current org was more than supportive to me. [name], [name], and [name] helped me with creating new org."

My own experiences as a regular members of the community in question throw further light on the excerpt above. Towards the end of my participant observation I did not play as frequently as before, experiencing fatigue from having to play the game for work-related purposes. Still, I did participate at times, being present for example in what was later revealed to be one of the last, if not the last, community meeting. At the time of the meeting I did not notice anything in the community's atmosphere to suggest to me anything of its future disbandment. Soon afterwards, however, just days or weeks after I stopped my participant observation, Beta experienced severe difficulties and ceased to exist.

What was especially interesting in all this was how I had had no clue of the drama taking place behind the scenes. Even careful analysis of the last log files with the benefit of hindsight revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Still, looking back in time with the help of the interviewee, I realised that it was quite likely that conversations about establishing a new community had already been underway during the last days of my participation. It is of course possible that my blindness was due to my not being as active a member as I had been. Still, I felt that I represented a basic rank-and-file member in my ignorance, and I feel that if I had continued to play, I would soon have found myself in a similarly surprising situation as with the disbanding of Alpha six months before, something we shall take one last look at in the next paragraphs.

**The story goes on**

At the time that Alpha was disbanded by its leader I was playing actively, but had just had a break in my gaming of approximately one week. I did not expect anything dramatic to happen during that one week, since the community was fine when I last played; but I was proven wrong. After logging in the game, the first thing I did was prepare a greeting for my fellow members, as was the norm. It is difficult to satisfactorily describe my surprise when the community channel was not there. From the diary entry of that day I remember that the feeling I got was a mixture of panic and worry. I felt these feelings partly because I did not know what to do in such a situation, partly because I was afraid that I had been kicked out of the community for some reason or another.

After my initial shock I noticed that some of the more active members of Alpha were online. I approached one of the members, a player with whom I had had some private discussions before and therefore had perhaps a stronger tie than with many other members. Through a private message she advised me that Alpha had been disbanded by its leader and that some of the old members

had founded Beta to replace it. She invited me to join Beta's chat channel. Once on the channel, I was quickly accepted into the community, as described above in sub-section 6.1.2.

The diary entry and the log files from that time also show that I was not the only community member to wander around the slopes of Rubi-Ka in search of home. As one of my fellow community members noted when talking about the incident, the community was still there, but it had just been forced to operate through the individual ties within the community:

> "Yeah, I also got many tells during that time, and I tried to explain as best as I could that, I guess the [Beta] had not even been founded yet, just when [Alpha] had broken down, everybody was still wondering about what to do now."
> (Interviewee B)

This incident illustrates the strength of the possibilities of multimodal communication (Haythornthwaite, 2005) within social networks such as multiplayer communities. Finding themselves suddenly in a situation where the most significant communication channel of the community was unavailable, many of the community members could reach out to their fellow members through other channels. Had all the ties within the community been weak and reliance been placed on only the one main channel, the results could have been much more serious. Even though I thought that most of the members of Alpha had migrated to Beta, I later came to question this perception. It is possible that some of the members of Alpha whose ties within the social network of the community were weaker were left outside of the migration, without anyone noticing their absence.

From these initial steps, Beta started its own process of establishing values and goals, as described in the previous chapters.

## 6.7 Conclusions

This chapter presented a multi-faceted picture of the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities. The data sets used in this study provided a diverse view into multiplayer communities. There were examples of small and tight, group-like social networks where many members had met face-to-face or had ties that did not operate on the level of the game alone. There were also examples of large social networks where community members had ties to only some part of the whole membership, yet shared a vision of what the community was about and how they should behave in it. The small, group-like social networks were a minority in the data, however, which is why the analysis stressed those social networks where not all members know each other and where a significant portion of the communication between members is technologically mediated.

The variance found within multiplayer communities highlights the fact that they do not form a homogeneous body. Even communities operating within the same game can differ on almost every level imaginable, including their exclusiveness, their values and goals, and their norms and rules. Still, the analysis presented in this study has shown that multiplayer communities, whatever their differences might be, also share similarities in the way they negotiate the community process through communication.

Multiplayer communities require both commonality and communication to exist. Commonality forms the basis on which the ties within the community's social network are built, and it is through communication that the community process is advanced. It important both for a shared feeling of community and for an individual member's identification with the community that there is some shared ideological foundation (Beniger, 1986; Jones, 1998; Connaughton & Daly, 2005). One can think of this foundation as the community's values and goals. These values and goals are reflected in the various aspects of the community process, such as the community's rules and the way conflicts are handled and new recruits accepted, for example. At the same time, those same aspects of community process are used to constantly renegotiate the values and goals of the community.

The members of a multiplayer community participate in the creation of a symbolic community through long-term social interaction. Time operates both as something that enables the achievement of a cohesive community, and something that benefits from it. Only a small proportion of all multiplayer communities survive through the years, possibly moving from game to game. It is more common that multiplayer communities, being tied to joint activities within a certain game are short-lived, perhaps staying alive for mere months. Still, even in those multiplayer communities that are short-lived there may be evidence of the kinds of ritualistic communication and story-telling that can be seen as instrumental in the maintenance of cohesion and a shared feeling of community.

**Becoming a member**

The reasons for creating multiplayer communities, as well as the reasons for joining them, are manifold. Typical reasons include achieving a more enjoyable gaming experience through more challenging or better organized team play, the possible material and immaterial benefits from being a member, such as sharing knowledge, and the social advantages that interacting with like-minded individuals can bestow.

Some multiplayer communities have an open structure, and they welcome almost everyone willing to join their ranks. Newer or smaller multiplayer communities intending to grow can also be loose in their recruitment policies. The larger, more organized, and competitive a multiplayer community becomes, the more likely it is that the existing members will impose some sort of limitations on who can become a member. In such cases, it is typical for a new recruit to need to go through a series of tests or an interview, or have

recommendations from someone already inside. The purpose of this process is to make sure that the initiate fits in with the community's values and goals. After recruitment, there can still be a probationary period during which the new member is being monitored or tested, and only those who have proved themselves dedicated enough will earn the rank of a full member.

**Social identity and the perceptions of other members**

One of the central aspects of the multiplayer community process is the emergence of social identity, a collectively built understanding of the persona of the community. Social identity emerges through a dialectical interplay of internal and external definition, where an individual and his or her surrounding social group are constantly negotiating their borders through similarities and differences (Jenkins, 1996: 24–25). Social identity has several key-roles in the community process, such as motivating interaction between members and helping them evaluate the reliability of information coming from other members (see also Beniger, 1987; Donath, 1999). In addition, recognizable identities enable continuity, the basis on which many other aspects of the community process, such as roles and rituals, are built.

Multiplayer gaming is a playful context, presenting ample opportunities for identity play. Still, within multiplayer communities the idea of playing with fluid identities has to be balanced with the notion of the more stable identities necessary for the community process. Long-term cohesion and a feeling of community cannot develop in an environment where the social identity of the community members is constantly at stake (Goffman, 1959; Beniger, 1987). On the other hand, the kind of social identity required by multiplayer communities does not need to conform to our traditional ideals and thoughts of identity, which are essentially linked to our physical traits, i.e. to a face-to-face self. Instead, other aspects such as members' roles, skills, contribution, and overall attitude towards the community effort can be more important. These and similar matters become apparent through repetitive behavior, making them difficult to fake and thus relatively trustworthy as building blocks of social identity.

**Roles**

The emphasis on shared activities in multiplayer communities forms a fertile ground for the emergence of roles that are tied to practice. There is a multitude of roles apparent in the context of multiplayer communities. Some, like the role of a leader, can be found almost universally among different communities operating in different games. Some are game or community specific. Sometimes the roles within a community are formally acknowledged, sometimes they are more informal. Similarly, roles are sometimes positional, while sometimes they emerge in time through repetitive behavior. Positional and formally acknowledged roles seem to be more common in those multiplayer communities that have clear task-related goals and/or competitive elements,

and those communities where the social network of the membership is so large that it is unwieldy to have only one or a few members take care of everything.

There are several factors both within multiplayer games and outside of them that can have an effect on the assignment of roles. Examples of possible factors are players' knowledge and skills, their commitment to and enthusiasm for the community effort, and possible face-to-face ties with other community members.

Of the possible roles within multiplayer communities, the role of the leader is especially important. It is fairly typical for multiplayer communities to feature at least one strong leader. Similarly, in cases where leadership is shared, those members at the center of the community are important. A major task of leadership in any multiplayer community is to help the community create a vision manifested in the community's values and goals, and then motivate and help the community to reach it. Another major task is management, for example in the form of organizing those tasks within a game that require extensive organization.

The importance of leadership is highlighted because of the fundamentally voluntary nature of multiplayer communities. Regardless of whether a multiplayer community operates solely in a computer-mediated context or includes a face-to-face element, it is imperative for the feeling of community and the community process in general that there is leadership there (see also Connaughton & Daly, 2004, Koh & Kim, 2004). Absentee or uninterested leaders pose one of the most critical problems a multiplayer community can encounter.

**The inner circle**

Especially in larger multiplayer communities it is typical that not every member has a tie with every other member, but rather that members differ in their centrality to the social network of the community. Those members near the center of the community's social network who are well connected, participate actively, and have a significant influence on the community effort can be thought of as its inner circle.

Members of the inner circle are likely to be more committed to the community effort than rank-and-file members. This can be evident in how frequently or visibly they participate in the community effort. Indeed, it is typical in social networks that are widely dispersed to have a structure in which internal communication tends to concentrate in clusters and around certain well-connected individuals, who therefore conduct most of the communication within the community and often set the tone for the whole group (Wellman, 1997: 190–191; Baym, 2000: 144–147).

Members of the inner circle are also likely to be holders of the most significant roles within multiplayer communities, be they official or unofficial. This includes leadership responsibilities. Such role-distribution is related to a member's contribution to the community effort, something that can take many forms. For example, knowledge and skills relevant to the community's central operations can set members apart from the others in the rank and file.

**Norms and rules**

It has been said that following norms and rules is especially important in communities that are based on shared beliefs (Brint, 2001: 11.). However, communities based on shared activities, such as multiplayer communities, typically, can also include norms and rules as a significant aspect of the community process.

There are two prominent levels of norms and rules in the context of multiplayer communities. There are those norms and rules that are generally shared within the context of the games around which the multiplayer community process takes place. Many of them share similarities to the behavioral norms evident in all the various contexts of computer-mediated communication. In addition, each multiplayer community can have its own norms and rules. The two most typical examples of normatively regulated aspects of the community process are members' commitment to the community effort and reciprocity among members.

While the means by which transgressors can be punished are somewhat limited by the often intangible nature of computer-mediated communication, there are some ways in which norms and rules can be enforced in multiplayer communities. Multiplayer games typically feature some kind of an official level of administration. Representatives of the administration often have near unlimited power over a player's gaming experience, being able to both alter the gaming conditions or deny participation altogether. If needed, multiplayer communities can tap into these resources. From the viewpoint of individual members, punishing transgression can be much more difficult. The usual ways in which norms and rules are enforced are made possible by the social dimension of multiplayer gaming, with players defending each other, spreading good or bad word about fellow players, and using inclusion and exclusion from multiplayer communities as a means to gain leverage over transgressors.

**Conflicts**

A multiplayer gaming context can be ripe with conflict potential. Competition within a game or misunderstandings between communication partners can induce conflicts, yet these conflicts are rarely a threat to the community process by themselves. In typical multiplayer communities the more serious conflicts, such as conflicts regarding the norms and rules of the community, or conflicts of motive between key members and the rest of the community, are relatively rare. This goes against the common notion that computer-mediated communication encourages extreme behavior, for example in the form of flaming or insulting. It is possible that the general politeness and avoidance of conflicts in multiplayer communities is affected by their relatively small size and the fact that most multiplayer games benefit from some form of cooperation between players. Insulting the very people one needs to cooperate with in order to proceed in the game is - using game terms - an unwise move.

On the other hand, when serious motive conflicts do occur, they have the potential to be devastating for the community. Dispute among the leaders of a multiplayer community, for example, is a likely reason for the disbandment of the whole community.

**Disbandment**

There can be several reasons behind the disbandment of a multiplayer community. Typically, these include the members losing interest in the community effort, outside forces affecting the environment where the community operates, and conflicts within the community. Many multiplayer communities wither away without much drama, gradually losing their members as a part of the high turnover typical of the multiplayer gaming context in general. Of the conditions that can lead to a sudden disbandment, it is the conflicts of motive involving the leader or leaders that are the most dire.

When a multiplayer community is disbanded, it may come about that the disbanding leads to the founding of a new community or even of many new communities. Similarly, even without an actual disbandment it is possible that some members leave the community and establish their own group of players that then operates as a seed for a new community. In many ways, this demonstrates the community process taking on new turns and appearances. Conflicts, disbandment, or division of a multiplayer community can serve as important turning points during which it is possible to re-negotiate the community's core questions.

# 7 EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

The main goal of this study was to *describe and understand the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities*. The purpose was to analyze both actual communication between members of multiplayer communities and members' accounts of social interaction within the context of multiplayer communities. The emphasis was on a symbolic viewpoint, which meant appreciating values and norms as the starting point to understanding multiplayer community life (Cohen, 1989). There were also smaller goals within the main goal of the study. These were to discuss the concept of community in the context of computer-mediated communication in general and multiplayer games in particular, to discuss the role of sociability in the context of multiplayer games, and to present and discuss a stereotypical multiplayer community life cycle. While no single study can ever give us a complete understanding of such a complex phenomenon, I feel that the analysis presented in this study has succeeded in drawing attention to many relevant factors in social interaction within multiplayer communities, and in doing so it has succeeded in furthering our understanding of them.

Because of the interpretative approach taken in this study it is important that I as a researcher not only describe, but also question the methodology of the study. In particular this means evaluating the methods of data collection used. This chapter takes a look back at the choices that shaped the research process. Section 7.1 concentrates on methodological issues, including thoughts on the general approach of the study and the specific methods used. Section 7.2 discusses the way the actual research project proceeded, from conducting the interviews to completing the participant observation.

## 7.1 Evaluation of the methodology

This study follows an interpretative approach, meaning that it relies heavily on the experiences of members of multiplayer communities as well as on my

experiences and interpretations as a researcher (Frey et al., 2000: 18–20). By choosing such a qualitative approach, this study has followed the path taken by many studies into community life before it, and thus it can be criticized for many of the same reasons as they have been criticized. Studies into communities have received criticism because of the lack of cumulative information produced by them. In many cases, the knowledge gained from studying a certain community has quickly become old, becoming a historical curiosity instead of helping to build a general theory of communities, or a larger, more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny. (Brint, 2001: 7). Furthermore, studies into communities have also traditionally leaned heavily towards qualitative methods, with observation being the main method of data collection especially in the early 20th century. This general methodological approach has led to a certain dependence on the choices, observations, and interpretations of a single researcher or an informant. While definitely a question of philosophy, this shying away from quantitative methodology has been a source of criticism. (see e.g. Bell & Newby, 1971: 13–20; Smith, 1993.) Both lines of criticism presented above can most definitely be leveled against this study too. Since they originate in the initial choice of research approach, there is very little one can do about them. My hope is that the inclusion of viewpoints from quantitative studies and the multitude of viewpoints presented in this study help to overcome some of the partiality necessarily connected to qualitative studies. At the same time, I embrace that same partiality in many ways, enlightened by the depth of understanding a qualitative approach can reach.

In order to increase the "validity" of the study, many qualitative researchers engage in an activity that can be called *triangulation*, using different methods to validate their findings. This study is no exception, as I have constructed the analysis on the basis of multiple sets of data, bridging multiple viewpoints and voices to produce an account of social interaction in multiplayer communities. Instead of triangulation, however, I would like to speak of *crystallization*, which, in the words of Richardson (1994: 522), "*…provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic.*" The purpose of including varying viewpoints is not to reach a fixed point that could be triangulated out, but to provide a multidimensional view of the phenomena under scrutiny. In this goal I feel I succeeded. The data gathered through participant observation and the data gathered through interviews supported each other throughout the research process. During analysis a discovery in one set initiated at times a discovery in the other.

Studies into games utilize typically at least one of the following three approaches to data-collection. First, researchers can look at game design, mechanics, and rules. Second, they can gain information from others who play, for example by observing their play or by listening to their experiences. Third, researchers can play games themselves. These three approaches are not mutually exclusive, and are often used in tandem. (Aarseth, 2003; see also Kolo

& Baur, 2004.) In this study I explored each one of these three approaches to some extent.

Qualitative studies, such as this study represents, can mostly bypass the question of scientific objectivity. Instead of striving to produce an omnipotent account of the general "truth", they acknowledge their situatedness and subjectivity. While there are those to whom such a postmodernist position might seem a weakness, it actually allows for qualitative researchers to, "*…have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it*" (Richardson, 1994: 518). Since research approaches utilizing participant observation are usually deeply rooted in a qualitative, interpretative approach that emphasizes the validity of the interpretations of the researcher, staining or contaminating the data should not be an issue, even though it is sometimes seen as such (e.g. Mann & Stewart, 2000: 90). No researcher working in the field can remain objective or neutral, and his or her ideas will eventually mix with the ideas and attitudes of the people who constitute the community under scrutiny. In addition, the social relationships formed between the researcher and the participants of the study should not be seen as spoiling the original social reality in any way. Rather, they help to bring out the factors affecting similar relationships within the community and to discuss them as continuous processes (Emerson et al., 1995: 1–4).

It might seem easy to combine varying viewpoints to communication in a technologically mediated context such as multiplayer games and then present generalizations about the phenomena within. In practice, proposing generalizations is difficult, if not impossible, because of the multiplicity of contemporary communication possibilities. I recognize that this is a weakness in the present study. Because I wanted to keep the approach as wide as possible, I did not go as deeply into the various game genres and individual games as they might have deserved, for example. On the other hand, the sheer variation within the context of multiplayer games means that such as task is well beyond the scope of a study that wants to look at more than one specific game. For example, looking at the genre of MUDs one can see that every MUD is different, and therefore each one should be dealt with individually if one truly wants to understand it (Kendall, 1999: 67–68).

As we have seen in this study, it is common that social interaction in a multiplayer communities is not limited to any one mode of communication or technological solution (see also Taylor, 1999). A multiplayer community's operations can be divided across multiple modes of communication both within a game and outside of it. From the point of view of researching communication within them, it is challenging to take such multimodality into account.

The greatest strength of the approach taken in this study is at the same time its greatest weakness. By offering a broad view of the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities, it has become necessary to leave some specific viewpoints out in order to keep the study manageable in size. To some extent this has resulted in blurring the fact that the phenomenon referred to as multiplayer communities is incredibly manysided. For example, multiplayer communities do not operate in a separated cyberspace with no connection to

the "off-line". Rather, there are several key dynamics in the community process of these social aggregates that can only be understood by remembering the systemic viewpoint that stresses the interconnectedness of even seemingly separate systems. Family ties, how dispersed the social network is, and what kind of effect world politics might have on the lives of members of multiplayer communities are but a few examples of the kinds of factors that have to be borne in mind, especially as the scholarship of multiplayer communities continues to mature.

On the other hand, the broad viewpoint has been successful in revealing how every aspect of social interaction in multiplayer communities has the possibility to affect every other aspect, and how important it is to approach these social aggregates from a process viewpoint. Several key-processes, such as leadership, the emergence of social identity, and the negotiation of values and goals seem to be relevant to almost any approach one chooses to take on multiplayer communities. Furthermore, these processes vary not only in relation to the structural variables of multiplayer communities, such as the game setting they are mostly operating in or the main methods of communication they utilize, but also in relation to the community's life time.

Last, but not least: As Barry Wellman (1999: 35) reminds us in his review of the concept of community networks, "*communities are differently composed, structured, and used in each type of society.*" Thus, the results found in this study should always be mirrored against the fact that all of the interviewees, plus most, if not all, of the members of the multiplayer communities where the participant observation took place, represent a Western culture.

## 7.2 Evaluation of the research process

The research plan of this study can be described as open-ended and emergent. What this means is that the research plan can be changed during the process, instead of being irrevocably determined at its beginning (see e.g. Frey et. al., 2000: 264). This is also what happened during the current research project. For example, when I conducted the first interviews the whole idea of where and how to conduct the participant observation was still very much under development. At one stage of the research process I even thought of utilizing the various public forums revolving around Anarchy Online to a greater extent. While I followed the discourse on such forums throughout the research process, I decided to concentrate on communication within the smaller communities for reasons connected with the economics of the research project: there was simply too much possible data on the forums to fit into the scope of this study. Another example of emergent design is the way the interviews changed during the research process. In the first interviews, much of the conversation revolved around multiplayer games in general as well as what the future of multiplayer games might be. These themes never totally disappeared from the interviews,

but I emphasized them less in the later interviews in favor of devoting more time to community-centered themes.

The purpose of the present study was to get first-hand experience of the living conditions within multiplayer communities by participating in the everyday life of such a community. Such an experience has been referred to as *ethnographic immersion*, and can be seen as a key to understanding the community process (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 87–91). With hindsight I can confirm that I most definitely gained that experience during the research process. In my case, the experience was mostly that of a rank-and-file member. In addition, my style of gaming and participating in the community effort was relatively socially oriented. This means that I did not experience the same kind of social reality as a highly competitive player or a "power gamer" might have experienced.

The period of participant observation that I engaged in provided deep and varied data for the purposes of analyzing communication behavior. On the other hand, with hindsight I should have perhaps participated more actively. I could have tried to participate especially at times when most members of the community were online instead of playing mostly when it fitted my personal schedule, such as at the end of the working day or late in the evening. In the end I participated much like any "normal" player and member would, playing when it suited my personal schedule.

Towards the end of my participant observation I did not play as frequently as before, experiencing fatigue from having to play the game for work-related purposes. I had not expected to experience such fatigue, since before entering Anarchy Online as a researcher I had only played for fun, changing games according to whatever interested me at the time. Confronted with the prospect of *having to play*, much of the pleasure of the game was gradually lost for me. While I was initially worried about the effects this lack of interest might have on the research process, I concluded that in the end the path I took represented a similar one to that taken by many other players. To find a new, interesting multiplayer game, to discover the social networks within, to participate in them with serious intent, and to slowly withdraw because of issues of enjoyability and budding interest in other topics – at every step of the way I behaved very much like I could have done even without the framework of the research project.

Early on in the research process I decided to conduct the interviews face-to-face. Perhaps the strongest factor behind this choice was the fact that I was accustomed to conducting interviews face-to-face, and had training for it. While my experiences of conversations using e-mail, instant messaging systems, and various voice-over-IP and webcam software were mainly good, I felt that I could achieve the best flexibility and a conversation-like atmosphere in a face-to-face setting. Later on in the data-collection process I conducted one interview with a person outside Finland with the help of Internet Relay Chat (IRC). This interview took the longest, 115 minutes, but because of the time it took to type the questions and answers the actual transcript ended up being similar in

length to the other interviews. IRC was chosen for the instrument of the interview because of the personal preference of the interviewee. This proved to be a fortunate coincidence since it is also generally recommended to utilize synchronous forms of computer-mediated communication, such as IRC, when conducting nonstandardized interviews in an online setting (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 76).

The decision to concentrate on face-to-face interviews had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, I ended up with a rich and varied set of data. My earlier experience from face-to-face interview situations was definitely an asset when encouraging the interviewees to engage in deep and dynamic conversations about life in multiplayer communities. On the other hand, I could have made use of more interviews with fellow community members, especially from the point of view of complimenting the data gathered through my participant observation. Such interviews can be seen as a way of enhancing the "reliability" of participant observation data (see e.g. Ward, 1999: 5–8). Towards the end of the participant observation I interviewed three people who belonged to one or both of the communities of which I was a member. Two of these interviews were conducted face-to-face like the rest of the interviews, and the third one took place in an IRC setting. One of these interviews proved especially relevant, as I conducted it shortly after the disbandment of Beta, and the person I interviewed had become the leader of a community of his own that had some of the same members as Beta had had. His views and opinions helped me greatly in piecing together what had happened during those times I had been absent towards the end of the participant observation.

Naturally, including more interviews with fellow members would have meant that I would have had to conduct the interviews in a computer-mediated setting. There are some known issues associated with such interviews. These include being forced to interview some members too early on in the research process because of the possibly high turnover of multiplayer communities, and interviewing the same person more than once without being aware of it, something that the anonymity of computer networks can lead to (Taylor, 1999). In addition, while the players of multiplayer games might generally be adept at using computers, for many it might be easier to engage in the kind of in-depth conversation necessary for open-ended interviews when situated in a face-to-face setting. Despite these small drawbacks I feel that I should have pursued online interviews with fellow community members with more determination.

Another thing I feel I could have done better was sharing my initial results with fellow members, something that is known as member checks. When conducting participant observation in a heavily computer-mediated context such as multiplayer games, it is sometimes difficult to contact the participants later on for the purpose of such member checks. For example, at the point of the research process when I had enough text to give to my fellow members to read, the communities I had belonged to were long dead and the natural turnover that takes place between multiplayer games had taken its toll. Chasing up players with the knowledge of no more than one of their screen names in one

multiplayer game was a task that I did not want to embark on. On the other hand, I could have given drafts of this research report to some of the interviewees I had met face-to-face as they would have been easier to contact. Here I have no defense, and if I were to repeat the research process, I would certainly do so. In the end, though, towards the end of the research process questions of time overruled everything else, relegating member checks to second place in order of importance.

It is hard to say how far into the life world of multiplayer communities I managed to proceed during this research process. It is clear, though, that the phenomenon I studied is manysided, partial, dispersed and mediated, as is typical of social phenomena that include a computer-mediated element (Hine, 2000: 61). It is difficult to cover every facet of such phenomena, and one can be fairly sure that something will be left out. Furthermore, change is always present when studying human social organization. In some research settings the pace of this change is more demanding than in others. It is typical for computer networks to experience even dramatic shifts in a relatively short time, and this holds true for multiplayer games as well. Technological changes interact with social changes, constantly forming new patterns of visible behavior. What this means for research is that it is often difficult to establish definitions and build cumulative knowledge based on previous research. With multiple micro and macro-level changes occurring all the time, it is possible that a research project that has taken years or even months to complete is already in some ways obsolete by the time it is published.

Qualitative research such as this study is typically evaluated with different kinds of criteria than those commonly found in quantitative studies. According to Frey et al. (2000: 282), there are four common criteria that help evaluate the value of qualitative research: "*The results from such a study should be believable, in that they should seem plausible to the reader; comprehensive in accounting for all (or most) of the data; grounded or tied closely to the data and applicable, leading to testable propositions and additional investigation.*" While an author him or herself is unable to estimate the believability of the end result - being the one who wrote it - as a long-time player of multiplayer games I do feel that what I ended up proposing in this study concerning the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities reveals several interesting and important aspects of the reality that players live in. As for being comprehensive, it is most certain that I have, despite extensive analysis, missed some weak signals within the data. However, I again feel that I have succeeded in accounting for most of it in a satisfactory manner. This study is certainly tied closely to the data, even though I am aware that I have at times taken the liberty of taking my eyes off of it and looking at the bigger picture of multiplayer gaming in general. I feel that this has been especially important in view of the pace with which the context changes, and the amount of research that has been conducted within the five years it took to bring this project from its birth to its completion. Last, it is my hope that by presenting this insight into the life of multiplayer communities, I have managed to point out distinct areas that merit further investigation.

# 8 DISCUSSION

## 8.1 Developing the definition of multiplayer communities

The analysis in this study of social interaction in contemporary multiplayer games has shown us that they offer a fertile ground for various forms of social networks. The whole idea of multiplayer games emphasizes aspects such as cooperation and competition between players. Multiplayer games have typically extensive possibilities for communication within them. Furthermore, players have the whole variety of contemporary technologically mediated communication at their disposal. Such multimodality can benefit both strong and weak ties, but it can be seen as especially beneficial for the formation of new weak tie networks, or connections between originally unknown people (Haythornthwaite, 2005). The long-term social networks that players of multiplayer games form have been given many names. Players and researchers alike have called them clans, organizations, teams, clubs, groups and communities, among other things. Indeed, the breadth of the phenomenon has resulted in the use of varying ad hoc definitions rather than a consistent definition or typology. In this study I have chosen to call these social aggregates online multiplayer computer gaming communities, or multiplayer communities for short.

As we saw in Chapter five, there are several factors that connect multiplayer communities. Multiplayer communities are fundamentally voluntary social aggregates, communities of interest. They include at least some level of social interaction between a variety of communicators who can have both weak and strong ties with one another. Members of multiplayer communities should experience feelings of similarity and communality at least on some basic level. The community process revolves around a shared symbolic reality, which emerges through the social interaction within the community and influences it in a reciprocal manner. The processual nature of these social networks means that the extent of the network and the strength of ties within it can change through time, meaning that some multiplayer communities are

more group-like and some of them are more community-like in structure. Multiplayer communities are typically bound together by shared activities rather than shared beliefs, making them communities of action. Furthermore, these activities occur within identifiable places that are typically situated within and around multiplayer games. This, in turn, means that at least a part of the social interaction within a multiplayer community is mediated technologically, typically belonging to the realm of computer-mediated communication. Being communities of action, multiplayer communities typically fulfill a specialized function rather than a generalized one. This means that instead of satisfying all their communal needs with one community, members of these networks can belong to several specialized communities instead of only one, all-encompassing community. This is reflected in the ties that form the community, which, especially in larger multiplayer communities, tend to be weak rather than strong (see e.g. Wellman, 1997).

Taking all the viewpoints presented above into consideration, and expanding on the definitions of community by Brint (2001) and Wellman (2001) presented in chapter five, I propose the following general definition for multiplayer communities: Multiplayer communities are continuing and dynamic communicative processes where groups or players of multiplayer games form networks of interpersonal ties. These ties are based on shared activities within the multiplayer gaming context, and provide sociability, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity.

The definition proposed here does not intend to apply to whole populations of thousands of people, like MMOG-type virtual worlds, whose populations can number in the hundreds of thousands or millions, but rather to the smaller communities within. An integral part of this approach is the position that even though it is possible for a great number of people to sustain some sense of community, the kinds of dynamics of social interaction discussed in this study are mostly related to smaller aggregates of people, something akin to what has been called *true communities* (Brint, 2001: 8–9).

**A closer look - expanding the definition**

The definition presented above is a typical descriptive definition of community. As such, it is abstract in nature, even though it relates directly to observations of existing communities. Such descriptive definitions are typical of scientific discourse. (Butcher, Glen, Henderson & Smith, 1993.)

There is much variance within those multiplayer communities that fit under the general definition presented above. When looking at this variance, there are at least two broad fields that appear to offer some kind of explanation. The first one of these is the social structure and relationships within the community. The second one is the intentions and experiences of members. In the next paragraphs, both are discussed in detail.

Focusing on the social structure and the relationships within a multiplayer community reveals several points of difference between different multiplayer communities. Some multiplayer communities resemble groups more than

extensive communities, while the membership base of others is so large that it is practically impossible for everyone to participate at the same time. For example, a multiplayer community might number hundreds of members, of whom only some dozens of members will be online at any given time. In such cases it is even possible that some members of the community will never have met each other. Despite this, as members of the same community they can share a common language, mutual conceptions of the "right" kind of behavior, and knowledge of various roles within the community. (see e.g. Curtis, 1997: 136-137.)

The social structures of multiplayer communities can also differ in the extent to which a community is hierarchically organized. The amount of official and positional roles within the communities can vary, as well as the extent to which power is shared within the community. Many multiplayer communities include at least one central figure or a leader, but there are also those that follow a freer form.

Looking at the relationships within multiplayer communities is another way of getting an insight into the variations between communities. Relevant questions here include how much social interaction there seems to be among the community members and how multimodal it is, how extensive the social network is, whether it consists only of strong ties curled into a tight ball (group-like) or whether it also includes many weak ties spread out thinly (community-like), as well as how open access the network is, or how easy or hard it is to get inside.

There is evidence that offline connections can be of tremendous importance for multiplayer communities. First, there are multiplayer communities that operate mostly face-to-face, using net cafes and similar venues as meeting places. Second, the operations of multiplayer communities are typically difficult or impossible to understand without knowledge of the relations, including off-line connections, of the players who constitute them (see e.g. Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003).

Multiplayer communities vary greatly in their amount of "virtuality", or how dispersed their members are. There are communities where either the whole community or a part of it often communicates face-to-face. On the other hand, there are multiplayer communities where most or all of the members are physically dispersed, leading to a necessary reliance on technologically mediated communication.

Sometimes the ties within multiplayer communities become strong, or are strong to begin with, such as when relatives or friends belong to the same community. In such cases the social network can be a goal in itself. Usually in strong ties there is evidence of face-to-face relations, or at least multimodality of social interaction (telephone etc.). Usually, though, strong ties are neither necessary nor even desirable for the operation of multiplayer communities. A multiplayer community can answer to its members' needs with the help of weaker, specialized ties only.

Looking at the intentions and experiences of members of multiplayer communities can yield another fruitful approach to understanding the variation

within multiplayer communities. People play online multiplayer computer games for a variety of reasons (e.g. Yee, 2006c). Similarly, the reasons and motivations behind belonging to multiplayer communities vary. These motivations are then reflected in the values and goals of the multiplayer community in question. The two most common and overarching value-structures found in this study were task-oriented competitiveness and sociability. In addition, the viewpoint of communities of action reminds us that multiplayer games themselves operate as a factor that brings players together. These three dimensions, presented in Figure 8, explain much of the variety of motivations behind belonging to a multiplayer community, and help us to understand the kinds of background factors that set communities apart from each other (The figure is expanded and revised from an earlier analysis presented in Siitonen, 2003).

When looking at the motives of members of multiplayer communities, it has to be remembered that the fact that members all belong to the same community does not mean that they all share similar motives. Rather, as seen in sub-section 6.6.1, motive conflicts can be an integral part of the multiplayer community process. When reading Figure 8, then, the exaggerated positions near the edges of the figure can be thought of as representing the motives of the majority of a multiplayer community's members. These motives can exist

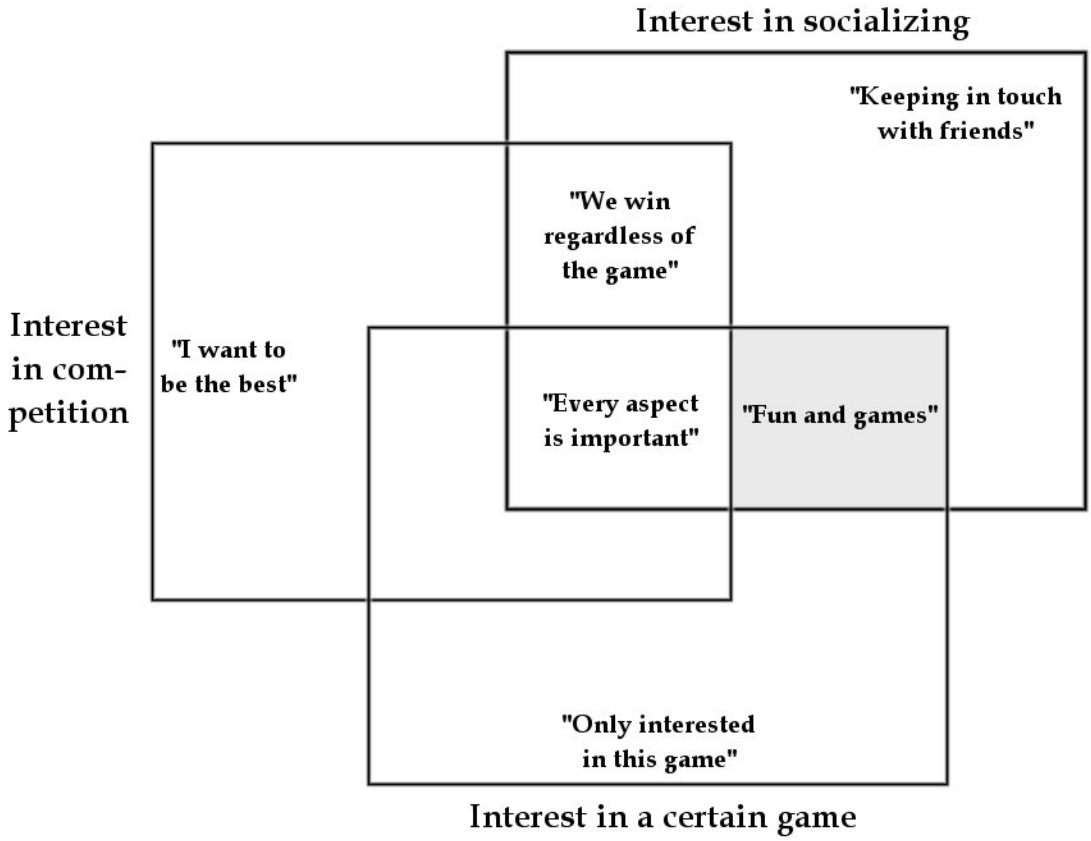


FIGURE 8 Preferences of members of multiplayer communities

simultaneously, but usually can be seen as affecting one another. A given multiplayer community's position in the figure is the result of the relative strength of the various motives within its membership. For example, both communities A and B from the participant observation data were heavily dependent on the particular game where they operated, Anarchy Online. In addition they had a decidedly social and casual atmosphere, and placed almost no stress on the competitive elements of gaming. These qualities position both communities near the area of Figure 8 that is colored darker than the rest of the figure, namely in the "Fun and games"-category.

There seem to be a difference in how much importance the members of multiplayer communities give to sharing joint task-oriented goals (such as succeeding in tournaments and leagues) as opposed to operating on a more casual level. A similar division between social- and task-related orientation has also been pointed out by other studies into the life of multiplayer communities (see e.g. Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Williams et al., 2006). There also seems to be variation in the significance of a particular game for the members of multiplayer communities, and thus for the existence of the community itself. For some members, a certain game can be all-important, meaning that they seek company only within the boundaries of that game. For others, it is the company that dictates the games they play. A multiplayer community might, for example, move from game to game, effectively only changing the setting in which the social network is situated (see also Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003).

The analysis also recognized a type of member who views multiplayer games as simply a means to the end of building or maintaining relationships online. For example, a person might log into a MUD only to contact their friends and acquaintances, instead of actually playing the game (see also Schiano & White, 1998). While it can be argued that those who use games only to be in contact with their friends and who do not actually play should not be counted as members of multiplayer computer *gaming* communities, the distinction here is difficult and should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Though simplistic, this distribution is in agreement with the well-known taxonomy of MUD-players by Richard Bartle (1996). In his taxonomy, Bartle distinguished between four types of player: *achievers, explorers, socializers*, and *killers*. Despite the limitedness of the classification (see e.g. Taylor, 2003b; Karlsen, 2004; Yee, 2006c), the basic idea behind it still yields explanatory power. The dimensions of socializing, task-relatedness and game-specific interests are visible here, too.

The analysis in this section has shed light on some of the variation that distinguishes one multiplayer community from another. Naturally, there are limitations to the definition and model presented. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make a definition or a typology that could fully grasp the ever-changing nature of community in multiplayer games. It is likely that many multiplayer communities will extend over any given categories, much as the players of multiplayer games have been shown to resist being put into simple, unyielding categories (Taylor, 2003b; Karlsen, 2004).

As the history of community studies has shown us, the task of generating an extensive, yet flexible, definition of community is a difficult one. There is certainly need for a simple, fluid, processual definition of community that would still be limited enough to enable comparative research and the accumulating of information on communities. Inherently it is clear that this kind of definition would need a way to sharpen its focus in order for it to be useful as an empirical tool. While the steps taken in this study can be seen as contributing to the creation of such a definition or typology, it remains largely a task for further research into multiplayer communities.

## 8.2 Looking into the future of multiplayer communities

Looking back at the growth of Internet use and multiplayer online gaming, there is reason to suspect that multiplayer gaming will continue to grow in popularity. This will apply not only to the kinds of multiplayer games discussed in this study, but also to a variety of other multiplayer games, such as the vast selection of traditional card and board games imported into the digital realm. It is equally likely that multiplayer games will continue to present a promising context for research into human social behaviour. This section turns the discussion towards those interesting avenues of research and development that have emerged, in one way or another, during this study.

**Converging media, developers, and users**

So far, we have witnessed only the beginnings of the age of computer networks. This study has concentrated on one of the aspects of those networks, the multiplayer games within them. It has been characteristic of early scholars to emphasize the special nature of computer networks. Indeed, such an emphasis has been justified in cases where the social phenomena related to CMC have only become possible with the development and spread of computers and other communication technology (see e.g. Costigan, 1999). The further various technological solutions and their uses evolve, the more problematic a technology-centered approach will become. In the future, more and more people will have access to a constantly diversifying range of modes of communication. Weaving into the complicated pattern of everyday life, the ways of communicating via technology will become at the same time both diverse and integrated with each other and with other aspects of human activity. To isolate a particular technology from that pattern is a lost, and ultimately unfruitful, cause.

As the great body of Internet research from the 1990s and the 2000s has shown, there is a multitude of ways in which people use computer-mediated communication to both extend real-life relationships and form totally new ones. Now, with the prevalence of various kinds of so-called hybrid relationships, in

which the communicators utilize both face-to-face and technologically mediated possibilities, emphasizing technological aspects might lead us astray from the path to understanding contemporary social realities. This can be seen across both weak and strong ties, with strong ties being especially varied in the modes of communication utilized. (Haythornthwaite, 2000; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002.) As Filiciak believes, "*We cannot, or rather choose not to, live without television, telephones, and e-mail anymore… That is why the dissemination of new ways of thinking which make the real and the virtual worlds equal, is only a matter of time*" (2006: 101).

Multiplayer games are a typical example of the way our cultural landscape can be built through the joint effort of various actors. For example, a game such as an MMOG is not constructed by the designers of the game alone, but rather becomes real only through interaction between the developers and consumers, living in an interdependent relationship with each other (see e.g. Taylor, 2006: 126). Multiplayer games merge the "offline" and "online". Thus, defining what takes place within a game or outside of it becomes exceedingly difficult (see e.g. Taylor, 2006: 9). While there are surely going to be players who want to keep the "magic circle" intact, as the space of gaming is often called, it is probable that at the same time we will see many more cases where the mixing of the so-called offgame and ingame realities is welcomed. For example, most of the interviewees in this study testified that talking and thinking about games is not limited to within a separate game world only, but rather penetrates their everyday life in many ways. This includes lunch time conversations with friends as well as surfing the net with the intention of finding the next virtual football player to purchase, or the next tactic to use. Similarly, events that originate outside the multiplayer gaming context have, and will continue to have an effect on events ingame. In many ways, then, contemporary multiplayer games are already "pervasive games", games that can be "on" every day of the week and every hour of the day.

Convergence between different multiplayer games is another angle that warrants attention from researchers into social interaction in multiplayer communities. It may be fruitful to concentrate on one game's social reality at a time because this allows for greater depth of detail and understanding. However, it may be equally worthwhile to acknowledge that multiplayer games are not entirely separate from one another. A multiplayer community can easily span across many multiplayer games, even playing several of them at the same time. In such cases, the community is not necessarily bound or determined by a certain game any more than it is bound or determined by a certain means of communication. It might even be the case that a community does not use the communication possibilities offered by a particular game to keep in touch within it. Social interaction in such communities can hardly be understood if one limits the scope of one's observation to any one particular game. At the very least, it is likely that some or all members of a typical multiplayer community will be involved in other CMC-based social networks or have other computer gaming activities besides the community that happens to be under scrutiny by the researcher.

**Fluid identities**

The question of fluid identities and identity play, which has received much attention, will continue to present interesting challenges for the developers, players, and researchers of multiplayer games. We have only just gotten used to the idea that we seem to have much more freedom to shape our "selves" than our ancestors did (see e.g. Filiciak, 2006: 93). Now, with the normalizing of the so-called new communication technologies, we just might have to get used to the idea that, "on the Internet, *everybody* knows you're a dog" (adapting Peter Steiner's original comic from 1993).

Already in the current computer networks it is possible to trace a person with almost pinpoint accuracy if necessary, and if the person in question does not take special measures to protect his or her face-to-face identity. Furthermore, it is possible that we shall see a growth in the use of mobile communication technologies in the realm of multiplayer games. From the viewpoint of fluid identities, it might be that participating in a multiplayer game through one's mobile device will be fundamentally different from participating in a MUD from a public PC at a library, for example.

Another aspect of fluid identities comes from the knowledge that a significant portion of MMOG players play the game with a romantic partner or with other family members (25% and 19%, respectively). All in all, the vast majority (70 per cent) of players report playing MMO-games with someone with whom they have a face-to-face relationship. (Yee, 2006a.) Even if players of multiplayer games do not have a face-to-face relationship to begin with, there are many who do not feel the need to keep the ingame characters and the player guiding them separate. For example, there are services in the Net where players of MMO-games can present their photographs beside the information (name, character class, race, experience level, server, picture etc.) about their ingame characters[31].

It seems that in many ways the underlying processes of impression-forming and creating and maintaining relationships are indeed similar in CMC and face-to-face communication, as has been asserted before (e.g. Walther, 1993). There must indeed be special characteristics in each context, but the general processes, as well as the needs and motivations behind them, are similar. We have a tendency to form impressions of our communication partners, just as we have a tendency to be interested in the kind of image we present to others.

**Leadership in multiplayer communities**

Leadership seems to be one of the central issues in most multiplayer communities. Sometimes the role of leader can be a symbolic one, sometimes it can be more functional and centered around management tasks. What appears especially interesting are questions regarding the similarities between

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31 E.g. http://www.darkportal.net

leadership in multiplayer communities and leadership in other kinds of dispersed groups, such as dispersed work teams. Are the two comparable, and if so, on what levels? At the very least we will surely see occasions when players will use their experience as raid leaders in MMOGs as an asset in a job interview, something that has already been rumored.

Overall the impact of leadership on multiplayer communities, and especially on the feeling of community cannot be overstated. It seems that more effort should go into seeking to understand different leadership strategies and their importance in the multiplayer community process.

**Intercultural multiplayer communities**

Another interesting topic of research connected to social interaction in multiplayer communities is that of intercultural communication. Studying social interaction in online multiplayer computer games faces many of the same challenges that Internet research in general has to face. The sheer variation within the context makes it difficult to generalize findings across the field. Just as there is no one Internet one can speak of, so one can rarely make statements about online multiplayer gaming as a whole. For example, the generalizations presented in the previous chapters are based mainly on research conducted among English-speaking players. It is possible that wholly different social and material realities exist within the larger player population. There are several examples of multiplayer games that operate mostly within one national culture or language group, but there are similarly many examples of multiplayer games and communities that operate on an intercultural level.

There is a multitude of relevant questions concerning the intercultural realities of multiplayer games and communities. Are there some special qualities or dimensions of the gaming culture that only intercultural multiplayer communities possess? How does the principal language of the game relate to the language used in an intercultural community? What are the dynamics of social interaction between such communities? How do cultures of origin manifest themselves in intercultural multiplayer communities where one culture is more dominant than the others? How are players from different cultures perceived by other gamers? Do the possible disagreements and problems existing outside the game follow players into the interaction within it, or does the culture of the virtual world diminish the impact of the culture of origin of the individual players? In addition, questions connected to language use and ethnocentrism, both from the point of view of the researcher and of the participants, remain mainly unanswered (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 198-201).

**Longitudinal research**

There are several factors that make it difficult for a multiplayer community to live for many years. Some communities associate so strongly with a particular game that they encounter problems when that game is discontinued. Some communities fall victim to the often utilitarian nature of multiplayer gaming,

where groups and communities can be seen as a means to the end of achieving something in the game, and can be duly disbanded after these goals have been reached. Besides, high levels of cohesion might take a long time to build up in a totally digital environment, putting yet more pressure on the longevity of multiplayer communities. Many small groups never develop into what one could call communities. And perhaps it is not desirable that they should, but rather we should be glad of the possibilities our contemporary extended networks of mainly weak ties can offer to us.

The history of online multiplayer games and communities is still relatively young. It is possible that once more people learn about operating in such communities, their dynamics might change and we shall see more long-time multiplayer communities than before. Even within the data of this study, long-term social commitment was not totally absent, as there were examples of communities that had persisted for many years and still seemed to be going strong. Studying such communities might offer us our first truly longitudinal glimpses into the ever evolving process of multiplayer communities.

**A playfield of social interaction and technological development**

While a context such as online multiplayer gaming might have certain special qualities, this does not mean that the knowledge gleaned from it could not be put to use in other similar contexts as well. There are many reasons why multiplayer computer games and the communities operating within them offer an interesting foundation for studying social interaction online.

Most massive online multiplayer computer games have been designed especially to encourage cohesiveness and cooperation between players. The mechanics of the game work to the end of encouraging interaction. For example, in some cases it might be that when communicating through technologically-mediated means, one has to make explicit many issues that would be left implicit if the communication were taking place in a face-to-face context[32].

The field of online multiplayer computer games is also in constant flux. New technologies and new games are being developed all the time, and players come up with novel ways of utilizing the communication possibilities at hand with every new generation of games. Naturally, this kind of change does not happen daily, and some of the dynamics of social interaction within the online multiplayer gaming context can be traced back to the very early MUDs, for example. Still, the general tendency of change is ever present. For example, there is some indication that the generations who have grown up immersed in the so-called new communication technologies not only use them more often than older generations, but also use them more *socially* than older generations (Luukka et al., 2001). It is very probable, then, that the social uses of technology will continue to change and evolve as these generations grow up, and that this

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32 This idea was originally presented by Walther, J. 2005 in an oral presentation during a conference in Helsinki, Finland (Viestinnän tutkimuksen päivät 2005).

social tendency will continue to flourish in the context of online multiplayer games as well.

Multiplayer games can also offer a fertile ground for technological experiments. Practices formed in the context of multiplayer games do not necessarily stay there, but rather can also become popular in a wider context. For example, the various experiments on computer-mediated nonverbal communication that are evident in contemporary multiplayer games could well advance the field of computer-mediated communication in general. Might we reach new heights of a sense of virtual togetherness when physics-engines and similar advances in both hardware and software strive to allow for a more *tangible* gaming experience, up to the point that we could actually feel the other player's touch (see e.g. Durlach & Slater, 2000)?

It is likely that the virtual worlds of multiplayer games will continue to be on the cutting edge of virtual world development and as a source of data on human behavior in such settings, if only because they allow for a combination of diversity and controllability and involve a much greater number of individual participants than could be achieved in laboratories (see e.g. Castronova, 2006).

Whatever view one takes on the development of multiplayer games, the aspect of communication and collaboration between gamers remains a central one, even to the extent that game developers might need to re-focus their often technology-centered views and concentrate instead on communication, if they wish their games to become popular environments for multiplayer community activities. In the words of one interviewee, an ideal multiplayer game would have:

> "[…] an easy way to form an ORG, very light network traffic as for the game, it may consume some resources for talk, graphically not too fancy, and there has to be lots of variety in the game itself. So easy on hardware while upgrading communication." (Interviewee G)

While computer networks and computer-mediated communication have been around for some time, it is likely that we are still far from reaching the limits of computer-mediated social interaction. Even though computers have been an integral part of everyday-experience for at least one generation of people from industrialized nations, networking with the help of CMC is still "new" to us in many ways. Sometimes this means that it is difficult to analyze the change that is going on, as we are too close to it ourselves. We are probably just now developing those practices and values that will be self-evident for citizens of tomorrow's networked information society.

**Parting words**

As there is no *one* culture of digital gaming, there is no one culture of online gaming either. The purpose of this study has been to provide a vantage point for illuminating and understanding existing and emergent cultures of online

multiplayer gaming communities. Since its origin, the field of computer-mediated communication has become significantly diversified. This variation has made it risky to present generalizations concerning the whole scope of CMC, or even that of the Internet. From a communications perspective, there is no single entity called "the Internet", but instead we find multiple, partly overlapping communication platforms. The various social phenomena that take place in computer-mediated contexts are often too elastic to be captured within simple generalizations. It is therefore recommendable to observe them from a certain viewpoint or angle. In this study, that angle has been that of communication in multiplayer communities.

As we have seen throughout this study, the dynamics of social interaction in multiplayer communities often feel familiar from face-to-face experience. Multiplayer communities certainly have their own dynamics, their own strengths and weaknesses. At the same time they do not operate somewhere out there in an isolated cyberspace: rather, they consist of relationships between individuals who can be connected in various ways, both face-to-face and technologically mediated, according to their communication needs and the possibilities at hand.

In conclusion, there is no indication that we might see fewer or narrower forms of social networks operating around multiplayer computer games in the future. Rather, with the constant development of information and communication technologies, it is likely that new ways of forming social bonds through game-related computer-mediated communication will emerge. On a similar note, it is equally likely that research into social interaction in multiplayer communities will continue to expand in scope. Working on definitions and typologies that help guide and categorize research will, therefore, be of crucial importance if we want to benefit fully from the ever-increasing amount of information that we have about multiplayer communities, and the people that form them.

# YHTEENVETO

## Vuorovaikutus verkkopeliyhteisöissä

Ajatus siitä, että tietoverkot antaisivat maantieteellisesti hajallaan oleville ihmisille mahdollisuuden muodostaa valintaan perustuvia yhteisöjä, ei ole uusi. Idea tällaisista yhteisöistä on ollut julkilausuttuna tavoitteena jo 1960-luvulla ARPANETin kehittäjien keskuudessa, aikana jolloin nykyisten tietoverkkojen perustukset laskettiin (Licklider & Taylor, 1968). Verkkoyhteisöt saapuivat suuren yleisön tietoisuuteen kuitenkin vasta 1990-luvulla, kun teknologian kehitys toi verkkoyhteisöjen jäsenyyden muutamien asianharrastajien piiristä jokaisen tietokoneenkäyttäjän ulottuville. Tietokonepelit, ja erityisesti monen pelaajan verkkopelit, ovat kulkeneet samankaltaisen kehityskulun läpi. Tietoverkkoja on niiden kehityksen alkuajoista lähtien hyödynnetty viihteellisiin tarkoitusperiin kuten pelaamiseen. Ensimmäiset esimerkit monen pelaajan verkkopeleistä ovatkin lähes yhtä vanhoja kuin tietoverkot itse. Verkkopelaamisen todellinen läpimurto tapahtui kuitenkin vasta 1990-luvulla, samaan aikaan World Wide Webin yleistymisen kanssa. Nykyisellään monen pelaajan verkkopeleillä on lukemattomia pelaajia ympäri maailmaa ja suosituimmat verkkopelit saattavat kerätä jopa miljoonien pelaajien käyttäjäjoukon.

Pelaajien välinen vuorovaikutus on monen pelaajan verkkopeleissä keskeisellä sijalla, ja juuri se tekee niistä kiinnostavan tutkimuskohteen viestinnän näkökulmasta. Tyypillisesti monen pelaajan verkkopelit joko palkitsevat pelaajia yhteydenpidosta muiden pelaajien kanssa tai suorastaan pakottavat siihen. Peli saattaa esimerkiksi sisältää haasteita, joiden voittaminen vaatii pitkäjänteistä yhteistoiminnan harjoittelua. Ei siis ole ihme, että verkkopelien ympärille on kehittynyt rikas ryhmien ja yhteisöjen elinpiiri.

Tässä tutkimuksessa keskitytään sellaisiin tietoverkoissa pelattaviin tietokonepeleihin, joiden mekaniikka jollakin tavalla joko tukee tai vaatii usean pelaajan välistä vuorovaikutusta. Rajaus on melko laaja ja sisältää niin massiiviset linjaroolipelit (esimerkiksi World of Warcraft sekä osallistuvan havainnoinnin kohteena ollut Anarchy Online), tekstipohjaiset virtuaalimaailmat (Multiple User Dungeon, esimerkiksi BatMud), ensimmäisen persoonan toimintapelit (esimerkiksi Counter Strike) kuin joukon muitakin pelityyppejä. Verkkopeliyhteisöt määritellään tutkimuksessa sellaisiksi suhteellisen pysyviksi ja tiiviiksi sosiaalisiksi verkostoiksi, joissa yhteydenpito verkoston jäsenten välillä tapahtuu pääasiassa tietokonevälitteisesti ja joissa yhtenä yhdessä olemisen tavoitteena on nimenomaan pelaaminen.

Tutkimuksen päätavoitteena on kuvata ja ymmärtää vuorovaikutusta verkkopeliyhteisöissä. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on muodostaa kokonaisvaltainen ja monitahoinen kuva tarkasteltavasta ilmiöstä hyödyntämällä sekä tutkimukseen osallistuvien henkilöiden että tutkijan itsensä käsityksiä ja kokemuksia. Sen sijaan tutkimuksen tarkoituksena ei ole jonkin tietyn teorian testaus tai formaalin teorian muodostaminen. Tutkimukselle asetettu lähtö-

kohta sijoittaa tutkimuksen naturalistisen paradigman piiriin (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000: 18–20). Tutkimuksella on useita päätavoitetta tarkentavia tavoitteita:

- Tarkastella yhteisön käsitettä teknologiavälitteisen viestinnän alueella yleisesti sekä erityisesti verkkopelien kontekstissa.
- Pohtia sosiaalisuuden merkitystä verkkopeleille ja verkkopeliyhteisöille.
- Muodostaa kuva stereotyyppisestä verkkopeliyhteisön elinkaaresta tarkastelemalla
    - motivaatioita verkkopeliyhteisöjen jäsenyyden taustalla,
    - jäsenten käsityksiä ja kokemuksia verkkopeliyhteisöille ominaisesta vuorovaikutuksesta,
    - jäsenille tyypillistä viestintäkäyttäytymistä verkkopeliyhteisöissä sekä
    - niitä rakenteellisia ja toimintaan liittyviä tekijöitä, jotka erottavat verkkopeliyhteisöjä toisistaan.

Lisäksi tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan verkkopeliyhteisötutkimuksen metodologiaa kuten sitä, millaisia haasteita vuorovaikutuksen tutkiminen verkkopelikontekstissa asettaa tutkijalle.

**Dispositio**

Tutkimus noudattelee vain osin perinteisen tutkimusraportin rakennetta. Erillisten tuloslukujen sijaan tulokset ja teoria käyvät jatkuvaa vuoropuhelua luvusta lukuun. Tutkimuksessa käytetyt teoriat voi nähdä osana tutkimusmateriaalia, ja niiden tarkoituksena on sekä selittää tarkasteltavaa ilmiötä että lisätä käsittelyn näkökulmia. Varsinaisia tutkimusteorioita ne eivät täten ole, eli niitä ei ole käytetty rajaamaan tutkittavaa ilmiötä.

Luvut yksi ja kaksi tarkastelevat verkkopelien historiaa ja muodostavat kuvan verkkopelikontekstista. Luvussa kolme pohditaan vuorovaikutuksen tutkimista verkkopelikontekstissa sekä käydään läpi tutkimuksen aineistonkeruun ja analyysin prosessi. Luvussa neljä tarkastellaan verkkopelejä vuorovaikutuksen näyttämönä sekä käsitellään sosiaalisuuden merkitystä verkkopelaamisen motiivina. Luku viisi tarkastelee yhteisön käsitettä perinteisten yhteisön määritelmien, verkostometaforan sekä virtuaaliyhteisödiskurssin näkökulmista. Luku kuusi pitää sisällään yksityiskohtaisen kuvauksen vuorovaikutuksen dynamiikasta verkkopeliyhteisöissä. Luku seitsemän sisältää tutkimuksen arvioinnin, ja luvussa kahdeksan kehitetään verkkopeliyhteisöjen määritelmää ja esitetään haasteita tulevalle tutkimukselle.

## Metodi

Tämä tutkimus edustaa laadullista tutkimusta. Tutkimus sijoittuu naturalistiseen paradigmaan ja noudattelee etnografista lähestymistapaa. Tämä tarkoittaa, että tarkastelun kohteena on vuorovaikutuskäyttäytyminen sen luonnollisessa ympäristössä ja että hypoteesien testaamisen sijaan kohteena olevasta ilmiöstä pyritään muodostamaan kokonaisvaltainen kuva mahdollisimman vähin ennakko-odotuksin. Tarkoituksena on siis ymmärtää tarkasteltavaa ilmiötä sen omilla ehdoilla sen sijaan että aikaisempaan tietoon pohjautuvat ennakko-odotukset ohjaisivat tutkimuksen kulkua. (Ks. esim. Frey et al., 2000: 257–286; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994: 248.)

Tutkimuksessa käytetty aineisto kerättiin osallistuvan havainnoinnin ja syvähaastatteluiden avulla. Aineisto kerättiin pääosin vuosina 2003 ja 2004. Osallistuvan havainnoinnin avulla haluttiin päästä lähelle verkkopeliyhteisöjen vuorovaikutusprosesseja. Aineisto kerättiin massiivisessa linjaroolipelissä nimeltä Anarchy Online. Noin vuoden kestäneen aineistonkeruun aikana tutkimuksen tekijä oli jäsenenä kahdessa eri verkkopeliyhteisössä. Osallistuvan havainnoinnin aineisto koostuu tutkijan muistiinpanoista sekä erilaisista tallenteista kuten pelitapahtumien kuvista ja pelissä käydyn vuorovaikutuksen lokitiedostoista. Haastatteluaineisto koostuu viidestätoista syvähaastattelusta. Haastatteluaineiston avulla haluttiin selvittää pelaajien käsityksiä ja kokemuksia jäsenyydestä ja vuorovaikutuksesta verkkopeliyhteisöissä. Haastattelut noudattelivat löyhästi ennalta määrättyjä teemoja, mutta niiden rakenne oli muuten avoin ja keskustelunomainen. Osa haastatelluista pelasi samaa peliä ja kuului jompaankumpaan tai molempiin niistä yhteisöistä, joissa osallistuva havainnointi tapahtui. Suurin osa haastateltujen pelikokemuksista oli kuitenkin peräisin muista verkkopeleistä. Kolmetoista haastatelluista oli suomalaisia, yksi oli italialainen ja yksi belgialainen. Yksi haastatteluista tehtiin Internet Relay Chatin (IRC) välityksellä, loput kasvokkain.

Aineistot analysoitiin erikseen käyttäen induktiivista analyysiotetta. Induktiivisessa analyysissä tavoitteena on löytää aineistosta sen eri osia yhdistäviä piirteitä. Näiden yhdistävien piirteiden avulla aineiston yksittäiset osat ryhmiteltiin teemoittain. Teemojen todentaminen tapahtui jatkuvan tarkistamisen ja uudelleen arvioinnin avulla. Teemat ryhmiteltiin sisältöjensä mukaan kategorioihin, jotka muodostivat perustan tutkimuksen tulosten esittämiselle. (Frey et al., 2000: 281.)

## Tulokset ja päätelmät

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että verkkopeliyhteisöjen jäsenet ovat heterogeenistä joukkoa. Saman yhteisön jäseninä saattaa olla niin 13-vuotias koululainen Ranskasta, 27-vuotias kotiäiti Ruotsista kuin 44-vuotias diplomi-insinööri Yhdysvalloistakin. Verkkopelaamisen konteksti antaa erilaisistakin lähtökohdista tuleville pelaajille mahdollisuuden solmia pitkäkestoisia, yhteistyöhön ja luottamukseen pohjautuvia suhteita ja näihin perustuvia sosiaalisia verkostoja.

Tuloksista käy ilmi, että verkkopeliyhteisöt voivat erota toisistaan usealla tavalla. Variaatio saattaa olla suurta jopa saman pelin sisällä. Yhteisöt voivat erota esimerkiksi siinä, kuinka eksklusiivisia ne ovat, millaiset niiden arvot ja tavoitteet ovat, millainen niiden roolirakenne tai valtahierarkia on ja kuinka niiden jäsenet pitävät toisiinsa yhteyttä.

Verkkopeliyhteisön syntymisen samoin kuin yksittäisen pelaajan jäseneksiliittymispäätöksen taustalla voi olla monia syitä. Motiivina voi olla esimerkiksi se, että pelikokemuksen koetaan parantuvan haasteellisempien vastustajien tai paremmin organisoidun yhteispelin myötä. Syynä voi myös olla yhteistoiminnasta saatava kilpailuetu muita pelaajia tai pelin asettamia haasteita vastaan. Syyt voivat olla myös sosiaalisesti painottuneita, jolloin yhteisön piiristä saatetaan etsiä samanmielisiä kavereita ja hauskanpitoa. Vaikka onkin tyypillistä, että yksittäisen yhteisön taustalla voidaan nähdä useita yhtäaikaisia motiiveja, on jokin motiivi usein muita painokkaammin esillä. Näiden motiivien ja yhteisön arvojen ja tavoitteiden välillä käydään jatkuvaa keskustelua. Tämä keskustelu näyttäytyy esimerkiksi siinä, millaisia uusia jäseniä yhteisöön haetaan ja miten hierarkkisesti yhteisön roolit ovat jakautuneet.

Olemalla jatkuvassa ja pitkäkestoisessa vuorovaikutuksessa toistensa kanssa verkkopeliyhteisöjen jäsenet lähentyvät toisiaan symbolisella tasolla. Tällöin voidaan puhua symbolisesta yhteisyydestä. Ajan kuluminen on merkittävä tekijä myös yhteisön koheesion voimistumisessa, ja toisaalta koheesio luo paremmat edellytykset yhteisön toiminnan jatkumiselle myös tulevaisuudessa.

Pitkäkestoinen vuorovaikutus antaa pohjan sosiaalisen identiteetin kehittymiselle. Tässä tutkimuksessa sosiaalisella identiteetillä tarkoitetaan yhteisön jäsenten kollektiivisesti rakentuvaa käsitystä itsestään ja toisistaan. Sosiaalinen identiteetti on prosessi, jossa yksilö ja hänen sosiaalinen ryhmänsä käyvät jatkuvaa samankaltaisuuksiin ja eroavuuksiin liittyvää vuoropuhelua (Jenkins, 1996: 24–25). Sosiaalisen identiteetin voidaan nähdä olevan avainasemassa suhteessa moniin vuorovaikutuksen prosesseihin verkkopeliyhteisöissä: se auttaa motivoimaan vuorovaikutusta jäsenten välillä ja mahdollistaa toisilta jäseniltä tulevien viestien luotettavuuden arvioinnin (ks. myös Beniger, 1987; Donath, 1999). Verkkopeliyhteisöjen näkökulmasta perinteiset identiteetin tukipilarit, kuten fyysiset tuntomerkit, ovat usein merkityksettömiä. Näiden sijaan yhteisön jäsenet rakentavat käsitystä toisistaan muun muassa sen mukaan, mitä yksittäiset jäsenet pystyvät tarjoamaan yhteisölle, kuinka motivoituneita he ovat osallistumaan sen toimintaan ja kuinka luotettavia he ovat. Tällaiset tekijät tulevat ilmi ainoastaan pitkäkestoisen vuorovaikutuksen kautta, mikä tekee niistä vaikeita teeskennellä. Pitkäkestoinen vuorovaikutus ja käsitys sosiaalisesta identiteetistä luovatkin pohjan monille yhteisön kannalta tärkeille ilmiöille kuten roolien ja rituaalien vakiinnuttamiselle. Pitkäjänteisen vuorovaikutuksen merkitys painottuu esimerkiksi johtajaksi valikoitumisen ja yhteisön sisäryhmän syntymisen yhteydessä.

Verkkopeliyhteisöjen tarkastelu hyötyy prosessinäkökulmasta. Vaikka yksikään ryhmä tai yhteisö ei ole koskaan täysin stabiili ja muuttumaton, korostuu jatkuva muutos verkkopelikontekstissa. Tietoverkoille ominainen osallistumisen vapaaehtoisuus merkitsee sitä, että motivaation laskiessa verkkopeliyhteisöllä saattaa olla vain vähän keinoja taistella joukkopakoa vastaan. Uusia pelejä tulee markkinoille jatkuvasti, jolloin pelien välinen liike saattaa verottaa yhteisön jäsenpohjaa. Yhteisön jäsenten sosiaalinen verkosto saattaa rakentua puhtaasti jonkin tietyn pelin varaan, jolloin muita tapoja pitää yhteyttä ei välttämättä ole käytössä siinä tapauksessa että pelin sisäinen viestintäverkosto jostain syystä pettää. Käytännössä vain harva verkkopeliyhteisö elää vuosia, vaikka poikkeuksiakin toki on. On mahdollista että yhteisön jäsenten väliset suhteet tiivistyvät ajan myötä tai että ne ovat tiiviitä jo alusta lähtien. Tällaiset yhteisöt saattavat selviytyä läpi kriisikausien ja pelaajakatojen tai esimerkiksi vaihtaa toimintaympäristöään pelistä toiseen.

Prosessi- ja verkostonäkökulmista käsin yksittäisen yhteisön kuolema ei välttämättä merkitse koko verkoston romahtamista. On tavallista, että verkkopeliyhteisöistä eroaa pieniä versoja, jotka kasvavat uusiksi yhteisöiksi, tai että verkkopeliyhteisön kuoleman jälkeen osa sen verkostosta alkaa rakentaa uutta yhteisöä.

Tulokset nostavat esiin lukuisia haasteita tulevalle tutkimukselle. Vuorovaikutus verkkopeliyhteisöissä on jatkuvasti muuttuva ja monitahoinen ilmiö, jolla on monia yhtymäkohtia muihin vuorovaikutuksen konteksteihin. Nykyaikaisen viestintätodellisuuden monimuotoisuus samoin kuin eri viestintätapojen välinen konvergenssi asettavat erityishaasteita minkä tahansa viestinnän ilmiön kokonaisvaltaiselle ymmärtämiselle. Esimerkiksi verkkopelikontekstissa jonkin tietyn pelin sisäiseen dynamiikkaan keskittyminen ei välttämättä auta ymmärtämään kaikkia pelissä toimivia verkkopeliyhteisöjä. Yhteisöillä saattaa olla pitkäkin historia muissa peleissä tai toimintaympäristöissä. Niiden jäsenistöistä osa saattaa tavata toisiaan kasvokkain ja osa teknologian välityksellä, ja jäsenten välinen yhteydenpito saattaa perustua suurimmaksi osaksi varsinaisen verkkopelin ulkopuolisiin viestintämahdollisuuksiin. Vastaavan haasteen tulevalle tutkimukselle tarjoaa pitkittäistutkimuksen vaikeus kontekstissa, jossa tarkastelun kohteena olevat ilmiöt ovat jatkuvan muutoksen kohteena. Myös lukuisat eettiset kysymykset tulevat tulevaisuudessakin haastamaan vuorovaikutuksen tutkijoita verkkopelikontekstissa.

Verkkopelikontekstin tutkiminen tarjoaa mahdollisuuden syventää ymmärrystä muun muassa identiteetin rakentumisesta, teknologiavälitteisestä johtajuudesta ja kulttuurienvälisen viestinnän kysymyksistä. Lisäksi verkkopelikonteksti toimii ennakkoluulottomana leikkikenttänä, joka auttaa näkemään viitteitä tulevaisuuden teknologisista ja sosiaalisista kehitysaskeleista.

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