

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS – CHATTING IN ONLINE GAMES AS AN EXAMPLE OF VIRTUAL CULTURE

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Communication changes form constantly and the importance of the Internet is in that context unpredictable. When chatting became popular as a new phenomenon in the middle of the nineties, it was primarily considered for children and adolescents, or as a forum for lonely people without social contacts. Since, it has spread to many other areas in which communication is an advantage, and today, chatting is used for very different kinds of purposes, such as consumer guidance, political debate, contact between the sexes, guidance in bringing up children and news from the stock markets. In the many virtual communities developing on the net, chatting plays a central part, and it becomes increasingly necessary to be able to exercise ones communication skills in the chat channels, if one wishes to participate in these communities.

Along with other kinds of computer mediated communication, chatting, too, has gained increasing significance in the educational sector in connection with distance education and e-learning, where students and pupils only rarely or never see each other physically, and where social contact and cooperation therefore must be established virtually. Computer mediated communication is a self-evident and obvious solution, but according to experience, may not work straight away. It is apparently limited what students can gain from social contact, where they must do without voice, eye contact and body language. Computer mediated communication may hence seem an improvised solution, that is not fit for creating actual social community, and only to be used when all other possibilities are excluded.

To many children and adolescents it is different. They do not consider the Internet a database containing stored knowledge, but a live virtual community alongside the physical communities they are a part of. On the net they find social contacts, they play, share knowledge and learn from each other just like in the physical world¹. To these children and adolescents, chatting, among other things, functions as a media for learning and development of new knowledge. An example of this is virtual communities, which emerge in connection with online games. In the following, focus is on such a community concerning the game EverQuest. The purpose is to investigate how these communities sustain and develop learning.

EverQuest – an Online Role-play

EverQuest belongs to the so-called online role playing games (RPGs), which have attracted growing interest concurrently with the development of fast net connections and relatively cheap flatrate systems,

¹ It must be stressed that this does not apply to *all* children. Even though more and more children and adolescents freely communicate on the net, there is a large residual group, who do not get the opportunity to acquire knowledge and abilities in net communication, and who only get negligibly little help for it in school.

where the expenses do not depend on the number of minutes the player is online, as for example cablenet and ADSL. Online RPGs have existed for a longer time, in the shape of the so-called MUDS, which, however, solely are based on textual communication. EverQuest and other similar games have visual components as in ordinary computer games. The game is solely designed for online use, and the players have the possibility to meet each other virtually by chatting while playing. EverQuest has several hundreds of thousands subscribers all over the world. Thus, the game is not only virtual, but also global, and at any given time of the day, thousands of active players are at work with the game.

Like most role games, EverQuest belongs to the fantasy-genre, and the plot is set in a medieval universe with a great deal of supernatural elements and creatures added to it. Each player's task is to control and develop his gaming device representing a person (an avatar) and to make it rise in levels. According to tradition in RPGs, each avatar belongs to a certain type or race and has matching characteristics and skills, which are developed through the game. Fights against different types of enemies and monsters are central in the game, and each individual has special abilities in certain areas. Some are good at fighting, others at healing, developing weapons or using sorcery etc. Consequently, avatars work best in groups wherein they can supplement each other's characteristics and skills. Players who do not enter into a corporation with others do not have good chances of making it in the game, because of this. Each player needs support from others. Primarily, the players are in contact through chatting and to a lesser degree conferences and email in a virtual global network, where it is immaterial whether the other players are in Copenhagen, New York, Tokyo or Barcelona. Most of the communication is in English, but other languages are also used between players of the same nationality, though usually only for more private communication. Most groups in the game seem to get together across nationality, and also, they often get together across age and genders². One of my informants, a 16 year-old boy, got great help in the beginning from what he called his 'best friends' (implicit: in EverQuest), who turned out to be a 28 year-old female student of teaching and resident of Denmark and a 56 year-old male accountant and resident in Alabama. To the 16 year-old, it was not interesting to know where these friends or other players were situated, how they looked, what gender they were or how old they were. The important thing was who and what they were in EverQuest, and whether they were a part of the circle of friends in the virtual universe³.

To the players, it is primarily the game at present that is important. As in other computer games, the players are aiming at the experience, which is connected with playing the game. Computer games that are not online, can be said to function as means or tools to create play, often in a social context, since computer players generally prefer to play with others (Jessen 1999, Jessen 2001 and Sørensen & Jessen 2000) This concerns both games played on one single computer where the players take turns playing, and it concerns games played via a network between the computers in the same physical space, as is the case in for example Internet cafés. Immediately, there is no reason to assume that the case is any different regarding online games, which the players voluntarily choose to occupy themselves with instead of choosing other activities⁴. Unlike other computer games, the players are not physically

² As far as I can ascertain, this is the case. Through a period of about a year, I have followed a group on the net, which continuously has gotten new members and has had many contacts with other groups. This is a qualitative investigation where the purpose has been to obtain insight into a virtual community, and with this background, I cannot claim to have full survey of EverQuest in its entirety.

³ I have seen several examples of how the players have developed their acquaintance to also include communication via chat and email, regarding other and more than the game including help in connection with computer technique and talks about completely personal matters. This aspect of the communication is not to be treated individually, since it is primarily the virtual community concerning the game itself, that is the focal point.

⁴ It is almost ritual, but still probably necessary to mention that computer game players and Internet users are not socially isolated individuals, who do not have any other choice. As for the EverQuest players with whom I am acquainted, they are not isolated either. They have friends, families, girlfriends and boyfriends, and of course like

together when playing “EverQuest”. Being together about a game can hence not be created in the physical space, but solely via the computer mediated communication. Concretely, communication takes place via chatting in a relatively small window on the monitor (see illustration below). Another part of the monitor contains information to the player about what he or she is in possession of. The rest of the monitor is left to the events in the game, where the players can see themselves, the other avatars and the game’s “bots”, that is the game figures controlled by the game, of course including monsters and other figures which are the players’ opponents. These visual elements have an important communicative function in the game. They add to the game a broader communicative register than the ordinary chat, and, to beginners, the visual elements are a help in understanding the communication in the chat, and thus to begin to become participants in the game.



It is in itself an achievement to decode what happens in the game’s chat channel, and one has to go through an intensive learning process in that area before participating on a fairly equal level with the other players. Since it is necessary for the chat text to be short, we are dealing with an extremely compact form of conversation, in which much is implicit and indirect. Nevertheless, the chat functions as the player’s most important source of information and social contact.

Chat in EverQuest – an Example

anybody else, they have problems with having enough time for school, homework, work, family and other activities including computer games.

As the example mentioned below will show, the conversations in the EverQuest chat do not look like what one normally would understand by written communication, and they are even more fragmented and confusing than other forms of chat. To give the reader a possibility of following some of what happens, there are comments and definitions of words in the text. This may remind one of a transcript for a theater play, but it is more complicated and thus not very easy to read. The extract in question is from a player's log and it includes all the textual information the player gets line by line at the time in question. Only to a certain degree does the extract give an impression of the game, since the visual event is lacking. Hopefully, it is still informative. The purpose is to provide an overview of what the communication is about and how it is conducted. As it will show, a lot takes place at the same time. Conversations cross each other, then seem to disappear and then reappear.

The text from the chat is in italics. The names of the avatars/players are set in bold. My comments are set in ordinary type. "You" is the player whose log is reproduced here – his avatar is called "Danhu". This avatar is, by the way, a so-called "Cleric" who can heal other avatars.

We jump right into the events, but first a little of the previous story: in the beginning, the player communicates shortly with two of his regular friends, Xanda and Kallika who are in different places of the EverQuest universe. The player himself is at present on a quest or hunt with some random fellow players he has met and formed an ad hoc group with. At the point where we enter the game, this group is actually in the middle of a fight, shown visually on the monitor, but which only leaves relatively few signs in the chat.

To make it all a little more confusing, the player just made an appointment to meet with another regular friend, Allant, and he is on his way through the EverQuest world.

***Xanda** tells you, Give me about 15 min. I think he wants to hunt with you) [the "y)" is a short version of the smiley :-)]*

***Kallika** tells You, 'Back'*

***You** told Kallika, 'Hi again)'*

Kallika has been gone from the keyboard a few minutes and is now reporting back. Like Danhu she is engaged in her own activities. Danhu and his group are fighting a monster, an "orc". Leftew belongs to the ad hoc group.

***Leftew** tells the group, 'Chief up'*

Leftew is in the ad hoc group. Like many players Danhu is a member of a regular group, which meet frequently and work together. Such groups are called "guild" in EverQuest. The players in a guild can communicate across other activities, and through the following, a conversation takes place between Danhu and the guild members. DerHexer is a member of Danhu's regular group/guild. In the following he refers to the night before, where Danhu flirted with another player from the guild, Jayle.

***DerHexer** tells the guild 'Hi dany, lonely without Jayle? Lol,' ["lol"=laughing out loud]*

***You** say to your guild, 'Hebe, yes very :y)'*

In the middle of this conversation, the system among other things reports on the damages in the fight Danhu is participating in right now. Here, his job is to cast spells such as "Immobilize" and "Celestial Healing", which during the fight will heal other members of the group when they are wounded by the enemy they are fighting – a member of the RyGorrClanSnowOrc clan.

Your immobilize spell has worn off.

A Ry'Gorr centurion bashes YOU for 18 points of damage

A Ry'Gorr centurion pierces YOU for 31 points of damage.

You begin casting immobilize.

A Ry'Gorr centurion adheres to the ground.

You receive 1 platinum, 3 gold, 3 silver, 3 copper as your split.

You begin casting Celestial Healing.

Thorel's body is covered with a soft glow.

You tell your party, '10'

DerHexer tells the guild, 'Poor danyboy, sing, sing, lol.'

You say to your guild, 'Hebe'

From time to time, the other avatars near Danhu cry out and want to buy, sell or give something away. Cries are indicated by 'says out of character', 'shouts' and 'actions':

Furrytoes says out of character, 'Anyone buying fresh rhino meat mines rotting atm ["atm" = at the moment]

Nuddelch shouts, 'Anyone need a snow griffin egg?'

A 'Snow griffin egg' is a valuable thing, and it has several offers, among others from Danhu who needs the egg to go on a certain expedition, where he can procure special ingredients to develop his abilities in healing.

Hexibus shouts, 'Me'

Morani says out of character, 'Yes'

You says out of character, 'Yes :)'

Zodateru auctions 'Looking for Coldain Skin Boots'

You say to your guild, 'Did anyone see Azu or Woody last night?'

Allant shouts, 'Did someone get the egg?'

While this is happening, Danhu is attacked and hurt. He gets help from a Knuddelch who is nearby, and in return Danhu uses his healing abilities to heal Knuddelch of his damages. He also has just enough time to heal damages in another avatar, Loban:

A frost giant savage hits YOU for 96 points of damage.

A frost giant savage kicks YOU for 31 points of damage.

Morani says out of character, 'Yes*'

-You have looted a Snow Griffin Egg.-

Danhu thanks Nuddelch for the help by healing him.

You begin casting Resolution.

Allant says out of character, 'Ok'

Loban looks resolute.

Hexibus auctions, 'WTB crushes topaz'

Fanuilh auctions WTB Druid Spells Frost, Breath of Karane'

You forget Symbol of Naltron.

Beginning to memorize Shield of Words...

You have finished memorizing Shield of Words.

Niily tells the guild, 'Nope they werent on'

Nuddelch cheers at danhu.

You begin casting Shield of Words.

Loban feels the favor of the gods upon them.

Allant shouts, 'Loc of rygor fort please'

"Loc" = location. Allant, who as mentioned is on his way through EverQuest to meet Danhu, needs a position to find his way. Danhu asks for his position. Meanwhile, the conversation in Danhu's guild goes on.

Your Location is -7619.00, 2950-65, 166.35

Zodateru auctions, 'Looking for Coldain Skin Boots'

Niily tells the guild, 'how do I know this you ask, because I am Azula hebe'

Morani says, 'Schade 8('

A frost giant savage has been slain by Lobann!

Your faction standing with Kromrif got worse.
Your faction standing with Krozek got worse.
Your faction standing with Coldain got better.
Your faction standing with Claws of Veeshan got better.

Allant tells you, 'Where are you?'

You says to your guild, 'I know and we had a deal about hunting, right?)'
You begin casting Resolution.

Nuddelch looks resolute.

Leftew shouts, 'Anyone selling dark ember'

Niily tells the guild, 'yes, plans went bad ('

Nuddelch thanks Danhu heartily.

You told Allant, 'At fort, almost. Got the egg :)'

Niily tells the guild, 'I would like tonight if you want too'

Niily tells the guild, 'Woody is coming on soon'

Allant tells you, 'What you loc?'

Allant tells you, 'you did?'

You told Allant, 'Yes!! My last egg :)'

You may not loot this corpse at this time.

Allant tells you, 'Nm I found it'

Allant tells you, 'Grats'

Grats = gratulation. In the game, it is very common to congratulate each other with achieved abilities or benefits.

You told Allant, 'Hmm, loc? It was not where I thought)'

You say to your guild, 'Maybe, atm I am helping as friend get out of 40 at the Rygorr:)'

Wontonk in says out of character, 'Anyone buying HQ cougar hides today?'

Niily tells the guild, 'Abbh ok)'

Niily tells the guild, 'I'm sorry about last night'

You say to your guild, 'Woot, got my 4th Snow griff egg!! :)'

Your location is -7624.67, 2764.56, 154.85

Niily tells the guild, 'CONGRATS!'

-you have looted a Words of Dissolution.-

Allant tells you, 'Neg 3000 pos 6000

You say to your guild, 'Thanks=)'

Your location is -7398.40, 3404.09, 145.44

Your location is -7279.56, 3443.44, 153.04

You told Allant, 'Ok, be there sonn)'

Noolyform tells the guild, 'Welcome ALL'

Niily tells the guild, 'Hiya Schatz)'

You told Allant, 'Sorry about that but really neede that last egg :)'

Your location is -4197.66, 108.31, 158.60

DerHexer tells the guild, 'Tststs,'

Aeros auctions, 'Wtb ulthork tusks'

Noolyform tells the guild, '??'

DerHexer tells the guild, 'Dont know english word SCHATZ, hm,'

You say to your guild, 'Hmm, if it isnt the little boy that broke a deal...'

Allant tells you, 'Its ok)'

At this point, Danhu leaves the ad hoc group with Allant.

Nojoke lands a Crippling Blow!(124)

Nojoke is no longer berserk.

You told Allant, 'Where are you?'

Allant invites you to join in a group.

You notify Allant that you agree to join in the group.

You have joined the group.

Niily tells the guild, 'DerHEXer where are you from? I dont remember heb'

You told Allant, 'Abb)'

You told Allant, 'Pulling'

Allant tells you, 'try some legos'

You told Allant, 'Ok'

Noolyform tells the guild, 'If it isnt that lil boy which havent RL troubs yesterday so close before vacation'

"RL" = Real Life. It is referred to that Danhu had some private problems the day before – in RL – which he apparently has told his guild.

You begin casting Stun.

A Ry'Gorr legionaire is stunned.

You told Allant, 'Well just so you know: a Ry'Gorr legionaire is coming here.'

DerHexer tells the guild, 'OBI is from the ancient country deep in europe'

You begin casting Stun.

A Ry'Gorr legionaire is stunned.

You forget Shield of Words.

Niily tells the guild, ' Abbbbbbbbbbb.'

At this point, Dimitre, an acquaintance of Danhu, reports himself. He is in trouble somewhere else in the EverQuest universe and asks Danhu for help. Danhu would like to help with his healing abilities but to get to Dimitre, Danhu must be teletransported. This requires that he works with an avatar, a druid:

Dimitre tells you, 'Hey bro can u plz rez me man.' [= Hey brother can you please resurrect me man]

Dimitre tells you, 'I died and LOST ALOT EXP!' [EXP = experience]

You told Dimitre, 'Ohh, I will need a tp then..' ["tp" = teletransportation]

Dimitre tells you, 'Yes plz'

You say to your guild, 'Hebe'

Hexibus shouts, 'All look a Poor wizzy deing again a MONKY ebbe'

You say to your guild, 'Sorry to hear that, hope everything is om)'

Caladwenya tells the guild, 'Anyone got anythin spare for a poor wizard perhaps?'

You say to your guild, 'Err Ok'

Noolyform tells the guild, 'Sec all phone call'

Your Immobilize spell has worn off.

You begin casting Immobilize.

A Ry'Gorr legionaire adheres to the ground.

Niily tells the guild, 'I might Caladwenya, have to wait till I go to the bank though'

Anackin has defeated Hexibus in a duel to the death!

Dimitre tells you, 'Got u a tp.'

You told Dimitre, 'Cool)'

You told Hexandar, 'I am going to rez a friend)'

Dimitre tells you, 'The druid name is Sharill ok'

You told Dimitre, 'No, I dont want one with that name, hebe'

You told Dimitre, 'Sure)'

Dimitre tells you, 'Lo' ["lo" = laughing out]

Danhu is on his way to meet the druid and is being teletransported.

A Multi Social System

As will appear from the text extract, the communication in EverQuest is to the player a chaotic web of many voices, each speaking his or her communicative system. Concretely, in the above-mentioned extract, Danhu must relate to all these systems simultaneously:

- Guilds, with which he has earlier experiences in common.
- Group/party, which he works with for a period of time.
- Private friends, several of whom he converses with simultaneously.
- Other present avatars, which he for example negotiates with.
- EverQuest reports he has to react to, accordingly.
- Bots, which he negotiates with (there are no examples of this in the above)
- Plot/actions of visual kind.

Immediately, it is confusing and it seems to be extremely annoying for the player that he must relate to so many conversations, including private conversation with people, who suddenly and unmotivatedly interrupt with comments and questions concerning something completely different than what occurs on the monitor. One would expect the player to try to limit the number of private conversations to reduce the complexity of the communication. However, that is not the case. Private conversations may be too numerous to the player, but they will not refrain from them.

The chaos, which these many communicative systems generate with their many concurrent voices, is really the attractive part for the EverQuest players. They do not regard the simultaneous streams of information as chaotic but rather as indicators of a dynamic social life. This is exactly the advantage of a game like EverQuest is that there are always others present in the universe. This means that friends and acquaintances welcome you, when you log on. You will always meet someone to talk to and cooperate with. Furthermore, there is always someone in the surroundings who notice when you achieve something, and you help each other, exchange objects and services. In other words, the player is in the middle of a *flow of events*, and he or she is constantly in contact with several social systems in a kind of “multi-social” world.

When it seems chaotic, it is to a large extent due to the fact that communication is written, whereas the genre is similar to oral conversations. Except that it is virtual, the communication corresponds to the one taking place in other social situations, such as recess in schools, in workplaces or at a party – all the places where many people are present without a centralized control of the events. On the other hand, the social community is clearly differentiated from other everyday situations including situations, which are centrally controlled and defined by others (for example school teaching), or situations characterized by loneliness in individual physical spaces. Specifically the latter is a widespread modern phenomenon. Brian Sutton-Smith (1986) who has done research on play for several decades, has pointed out that modern child and adult life is to an extreme degree characterized by loneliness compared to other epochs in the history of man. According to Sutton-Smith, being alone and focused for example in a work situation is something that requires practice over and over again from early childhood. It is perhaps in the light of this, one can understand online games and other forms of chatting best, namely as a rupture with the loneliness and boredom that characterizes the daily life of many adolescents and adults. At least this makes it understandable why a high school student, a female student of teaching and a middle-aged male accountant can get together – across genders, age and nationality. The social

communities in EverQuest are more exciting and varied than the 'room culture' with two or three contestants, which children and adolescents often engage in, in their spare time (Drotner 1992).

Online games as social spaces are in this context not an exception, merely a specific example of the communicative possibilities that computer mediated communication provides the users with. This applies to instant Message programs, e-mail, chat and SMS messages on cellular phones. From one point of view, they apparently cause a chaotic style of communication, which one immediately would expect to cause zapper mentality. From another point of view, the chaos becomes a multi social space that is not, by the individual user, seen as a problem, but the contrary: A possibility to create a desirable space for participation, or perhaps even more simple: a space containing social life.

A learning community

EverQuest is not merely an example of a well-functional social community, but also an example of an effective learning community. In that connection, one should not neglect the big difference between the social community the players encounter in EverQuest, and the social community one often encounters in distance education and e-learning. Often, in the latter case, there is little resemblance to a community and the users experience silence and loneliness when they go online. In distance teaching, it is in most cases left to the students themselves to establish a social environment, as it is the case when teaching takes place in a physical room. It is expected that the students are capable of establishing an environment, merely by being present. This is rarely a success, since few have the competence, knowledge and skill to create virtual communities, and thus do not know what to do with themselves in the virtual space. Computer mediated communication is today still new to most people, perhaps even to the teachers, too.

Even though EverQuest is a game, of which the purpose is not to teach but to play, it can still provide some of the answers to what is required to create a good virtual learning environment. For a good part, the answer is already presented in the above: A good virtual learning environment is in any case a place where one is welcomed by friends and acquaintances when logging on; where one meets somebody to talk and work with. Where someone notices, when you achieve something, where the participants help each other and share knowledge. However, a good virtual learning environment is not necessarily a clear, simple and well-arranged system, which the users can get to know in few minutes. The force of EverQuest is not simplicity, but rather a suitable high complexity, which opens a communicative forum for the participants, and not least, provides the players with a meaningful role to fill.

As a player, Danhu constantly participates in many communicative and social systems simultaneously, while the text passes over the chat window and disappears. While he converses with his regular group about former and future events, he greets and congratulates his friends, acquaintances and chance passers-by. In this way he supports the community in the social systems, he is a part of. While this happens, he has to relate to the concrete events on the monitor. As a reader of the text extract, one can hopefully sense, that the game is very demanding, and the players must satisfy these demands by using their communicative competence. Just to separate the different conversation systems may be difficult. It does not appear clearly that Danhu is learning and developing his avatar, concurrently. However, he is constantly doing this, as are all the other players in EverQuest, who, laboriously, must work themselves from level to level, for example by finding the right material or get points in battle.

Consequently in the course of the game, one has to both develop one's avatar and simultaneously learn to converse and get on in the virtual community, which does not only require communicative competences, but also that one is skilled in the rules, rituals, values, behavior pattern and language which dominate among the players. As such, we are dealing with the practicing of a completely new

and particular culture, that one gradually becomes a participant in on equal terms, after which one can contribute to sustaining the virtual community. Such a community is not a matter of course. In a dissertation about virtual culture, Kenneth Hansen indicates that it is often a problem for online communities that there are no functional rituals in the virtual space, which may ensure that the community is preserved. In short, there is a lack of having something in common in a space, where everything in principle is possible, but nothing is determined. According to Hansen, the participants of virtual communities spend a good part of their time trying to establish shared rituals. Audon (in this publication) refers to this phenomenon in children and adolescents, chatting in “The Skyscraper” and describes how a structure is created in the room via shared rituals regarding ownership of virtual objects.

Rituals are also important in online games, but here the virtual culture and social system are helped by the fact that given structures, assignments and rules in the game exist, which one is not troubled by inventing and agreeing upon as meaningful. The game is present as a fact, take it or leave it⁵ and thus, the players can concentrate on the game and especially on the companionship that emerges from this. A good part of this companionship is centered on learning the structures in the virtual world and on learning the rules of communication. However, the central rituals do not emerge directly from the structure and the rules of the game. There is hardly any technical or structural solution which in itself creates virtual communities, but technical solutions may promote or prevent the development. What is first and foremost a problem to the development of social communities in virtual space, is a lack of possibility of action, that provides meaning to the participants. To many, the possibility of action, which EverQuest contains, may seem pointless, but of course this is not the case for the players, who would not voluntarily participate in a plot without meaning, for hours, days and even years. In this context it may not be the representation of the game itself, which is primarily to kill monsters one should focus on. Indeed, very few of the players who would play EverQuest, if it only dealt with hunting monsters or developing one's avatar level after level. A rational, goal-oriented solution of the purpose of the game is not what is special about it.

What seems to attract the players is the opportunity to communicate and interact with other players. This applies to creating play and fun and especially to receiving and giving guidance. As player, you will almost constantly be in a situation in which you either receive or give good advice to other players, or are involved in cooperation regarding a certain task. It happens at regular intervals that a player consults an information database in order to understand something, but by far the majority of the knowledge one must acquire, the player gets either from other players or develops it in cooperation. Since the practice in EverQuest requires abilities of acquiring extensive knowledge and of learning a long range of skills from the player, the players are in principle never going to end the process of learning. The individual player is continuously in the process of training and developing and is simultaneously educating others. The players constantly alternate between learning from others and teaching, which gives the player a meaningful role and also a sense of balance in relation to the others. This variation in the role, as the one acquiring knowledge and the one teaching, is a substantial reason for the fact that the social community as well as the learning function in the game. This is also what differentiates the social relations in EverQuest from most teaching situations (physically and virtually), in which the roles usually are firmly defined.

Naturally, the roles are different for beginners. However, from the very start they get a meaningful role as “legitimate peripheral participants” (Lave and Wenger 1991), as trainees. It is perfectly legitimate to

⁵ This is not the same as claiming that the players uncritically accept the terms. Partly because they can easily find other games, and partly because there is a possibility of contact with the producer, who in his own interest gladly listens to suggestions.

be a beginner or to need guidance, and the players rarely ridicule each other. It is even more essential that the players very rarely experience not getting a response when expressing themselves or asking questions.

The players do not learn about the game through a well-defined, pedagogical guidance, but by participating, experimenting and trying. While learning they are so to speak sunk into the environment, which also differentiates from teaching wherein one is usually isolated from the reality, the teaching aims at. It is certain that participation is an effective form of learning, when one has to acquire a new culture and new communicative skills. However, such a form of learning presupposes that a functional system, an established environment one can be a trainee in and later become a valid member of exists. In other words, it presupposes an existing virtual culture, which again, according to Kenneth Hansen, presupposes rituals.

What is striking about EverQuest and analogous online games, is that *learning* in itself is a central ritual. It is important – perhaps the most important – center of attention for the social contact in the game, because learning is a legitimate reason for contacting other players, both to receive and give guidance and to get others' attention. That being so, it is of course due to the fact that the players have a positive attitude toward enquiries and toward sharing knowledge. While it is obvious what the players acquire from the role as trainees, it is less obvious what the players acquire by being teachers. It is not primarily status and approval, but *meaningful* communication and interaction with others. As teacher, the players get a role and an identity in the game, and being online becomes meaningful, at least as long as there are other trainees present.

The virtual community in EverQuest relies on this double role of teacher and trainee in an informal structure, and here the community does not differentiate itself basically from the social communities in the physical reality (Jessen 2001a). The learning is not conducted in a well-organized and structured manner. On the contrary, it is often conducted in ad hoc groups or through more or less random encounters with other players. This open and informal structure is the reason why the individual player functions both as trainee and teacher, and does not establish itself in a certain role. The players are at liberty to leave a group and find other players to cooperate with. Also, the player can alternate between being a member of a regular group or participate on more loose teams. Simultaneously, this means that the players meet in a universe, where there is always a possibility of meeting new social contacts and experiences.

Conclusion

At present, teaching and studying get still more well-regulated, orientated towards a goal and rational forms. This also concerns the virtual forms of teaching, which in connection with the development of e-learning are rationalized to a large extent. In some cases, it is certainly an advantage, but by far not in all cases. If teaching and learning is to be about other things than adding new knowledge in the shortest possible time, the development of the education culture is a key task, especially in virtual space, in which it only exists in incomplete forms. EverQuest and other online games seem to be at the root of the development of a virtual education culture, which can transcend the idea that this type of education and learning is the second best solution, if meeting physically is not possible. Virtual environments can actually also add new perspectives. It would for example be difficult to create an open learning environment like EverQuest wherein one can meet in a physical space across culture, genders, age and nationality. The playing and learning community arising around the game is not just an example of the fact that virtual social community can function, but also an example of the fact that this type of communities has its own foundation.

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