

PLAY AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES ON INTERNET

Since the appearance of the first networks, ancestors of Internet, playful activities have been present and have led to the appearance of playful communities. From A.R.P.A.N.E.T, the real ancestor of Internet, until the network such as we know it today, playful activities have been always associated, some of them original, others issued from the transformation of known playful activities. The technical progress allows now new kind of playful practices increasingly rich and increasingly accessible. For a long time, the game via a network had been the property quasi - exclusive of computer scientists and specialists. Today, playing on Internet has been "democratised" to a certain extent (it still requires a certain number of competence), and the network offers a great number of spaces reserved to the game. Thus, the game on Internet called "multi players" or "games online" consists in confronting others players on a same game through Internet that will make the link between the actions of the opponents. The proposals of game are vast enough: scrabble, poker, games by E-mail, wargames, games of confrontations, games of races, ... the offer is considerable.

To understand the implications of these new gaming activities, we have led a study beside French-speaking player communities on Internet, limiting us to those wich have the name of " guild " or " clan ". At first sight, these communities are related to " clubs of players " that regularly connect together to play in group against other guilds or between members of the guild. They have a site that confers them a visibility on Internet. Visiting these sites allows to perceive that beyond the simple practice of the game-on line, other activities are in use that participate in the working of the community.

Our study is aimed at knowing these communities of players (profile of players, age,...) and to understand the logic that animates them in relation with the double dimensions, the gaming one and the virtual one, that defines them. We are presenting here the main results of the study by stressing more particularly not the practice of the game itself but the different elements that are linked, constituting the virtual life of these communities. We will wonder if these practices are a part of the game or not?

The virtual communities

By basing us on the works of Lévy (1995), Rheingold (1995), Quéau (1993), Jones (1997), Smith (1997) and Mathias (1997) we have considered that the virtual communities suppose the presence of the following characteristic:

- A virtual common public-space where members meets eachother.
- A minimum of communicators, members that communicate to make exist the community exist.
- A minimum level of sustained membership : communities cannot exist without the responsibility and the quasi - permanence of one or several persons.

- A minimum level of interactivity: It is at first sight one of the most easily identifiable criteria since the games online are, by nature, interactive.
- A netiquette: a group of rules and laws that govern the community.
- A human trade network.
- The cyberculture: even if it can not be, properly speaking, criterion able to distinguish a virtual community from other activities on Internet, it characterises the specificity of the community as virtual.

These characteristics have been used as a tool of analysis to notice virtual communities.

Observing and collecting information on Internet.

The characteristics of our search (the activities and their traces on Internet) imply new forms of observation and data's collection. Some of the problems we've met to collect data are information about the functioning of the universe that we analyse. By that very fact, it concerns visible and accessible activities on the network that make easier the observation, which can be participating or not. First we have observed players when they were on the games. Secondly, we have observed all the places and the tools of communication that are in use in the players' communities. The observation of sites has allowed us to identify what kind of activities are staked in the guilds, as well as the different types of information, of values and representations that the guilds bring with their sites.

130 sites have been observed, but we have retained only 123. Some sites were apparently deserts or the responsible, the webmasters, couldn't be reached anymore, at least the E-mail address is no longer in use. We have constituted our sample by respecting a balance between the different types of game in use in the guilds.

This observation has been completed by a questionnaire conceived to notice the "manners of the community". This questionnaire allowed us to obtain information that was not always legible on the sites (number of members, frequency of meeting). We have found the player's electronic addresses either by seeking directly on the sites of the guild, or by different search engines or by contacting players on the gaming zones. We have sent 547 questionnaires, 121 have been returned completed, and 286 messages of "Mail delivery subsystem failure" have been returned. Actually, the E-mail that can be found on the sites are either false or no more in use. On the one hand, players change of providers very quickly, and on the other hand, by fear of piracy and "mail bombing", players are rather reticent to leave their real address. Only the webmasters let their real address on the sites. That made therefore 52% of wrong addresses, that is an astonishing result in comparison with the work of Smith (1997) which has equally used the questionnaire, and which obtained a rate of false address of 10%. In these 121 questionnaires, several members of a same clan replied. 83 unique guilds have replied.

The interview has allowed us to measure and to understand the "feelings" linking players to their own clan, as well as to the other members. The interview arrived after the observation and the questionnaire, as an ultimate level. 16 interviews have been realised on Internet, wich were in fact chats realised by the software I.C.Q., with some players that had replied to the questionnaire. Some interview has been very brief. It can be explained by the fact that, on the one hand, when players are connected, they are rather impatient to play. On the other hand, when the rates of connection are bad, and when one is connected by a phone modem, the interview can rapidly become difficult (more than 30 seconds to wait for a answer).

Types of game

For this study, we have limited our field of investigation to games requiring a software, excluding thus literary games and games by E-mail. We have equally, among these games, isolated the typical following:

- Fighting games in 3D, like Quake (Quakelike). These games are games of confrontation in subjective view. The player only sees the hands of its character, as well as the weapon that it wears. These games are either played in "deathmatch", or in "team-play". In this last kind of game, there is an aim different from killing the opponents: take a flag, defend a place, escort a someone... Today the most popular game is Counterstrike. A great server, The Champion League Quakelike, scan all the private parties as well as the official, to rank the best players and the best clans of the world .
- Games of strategy in real time, like Starcraft. These games are close to Wargames. They are commonly called strategy games in real time. This denomination of " real time " opposes games in "turn by turn". It just means that the players play at the same time. Each player (or team) has a civilisation to develop, they have to manage available resources for its development. As one goes along the civilisation growth, several buildings and troops are available to finally attack the opponents.
- Roleplaying games, like Diablo. Usually, these games are called roleplaying games, but there are other names like " adventure games ". The most popular name is "role playing games" because of their inspiration of the universes of roleplaying games, and of the heroic fantasy. Like in a classical roleplaying game, you have to create a character, to make it evolve and progress. The aim of this kind of games can be the confrontation with other players, that are called at this moment the "player-killer", but it's mostly a game played of team where you have to explore dark tunnels (Dungeons), cities, countryside and where you have to fight with monsters and creatures in quest of magical objects, kidnapped princesses, etc. It's also related to the roleplaying game because of the importance of the character and of the " role you have to play
- The M.U.D, like Everquest. They are very related to roleplaying games previously described. All archetypes of the roleplaying games are present (priest, warrior, sorcerer...). Nevertheless, the great difference is the permanence of its universe and its characters. It is also a matter of quests that you have to realise in team as well as confrontation between " player-killer ". But the great interest of this game is the permanence of the universe and the "storyline" The character you play, called the Avatar, will evolve during the games, gaining experience and the equipment... And when you leave the game, when you're not in the game anymore, the world continues to evolve. It is the great difference with the roleplaying games. In these ones, the universe disappears once the players have left the game. In a M.U.D., what one has created or build, a house for example, will stay in the game. Today, the most popular M.U.D are not free. It is necessary to buy the software and to pay a monthly subscription (around 15 Euros). Some M.U.D. are free, but they often are poorer concerning the fields of the player's action as well as the update of the world. Actually we can talk about real virtual worlds, by the constancy of this universe on Internet.

So we have four kind of game that can be grouped in two categories: on one side we have games rather directed to the confrontation (strategy game and fighting games) and on the other side games directed to the interaction of characters and to the "roleplay". This classification can however be contested: it is indeed very difficult today to establish a

rigorous and exact classification of video games, due to the creativity of game designers as well as due to the great computer's and technical progress. This tends to pass the frontiers of a determined classification.

Players

With the questionnaire, we have been able to trace the profile of players. Are this results representative of all the players on Internet? We have to remind that only players registered in the guilds have replied and we have to remember that, by the nature of the Network, it is extremely difficult to know the exact number of players. The average age is about 19. The players, as we could suppose, are, for a great majority, students. We have obtained no reply from girls. There is a strong representation of computer scientists for the adults.

The players, all types of guilds mixed, remain behind their computer's screen to play on an average of 17 hours by week. The longest time of play is realised by the M.U.D.'s players. Howard Rheingold (1995) had estimated it on an average of 24 hours.

The guilds of fighting games and of strategic games play indifferently between them or against others clans, with a little tendency for fighting games to confront others clans. On the other hand, the guilds of roleplaying games and of M.U.D play in a great majority between members.

The guilds are roundups of players, at least three players and are composed on the average of 29 members. In a very large majority (58%), the guilds are gathered around one game and players remain "faithful" to their guilds. In a case of membership to another guilds, the average is around two guilds. During the interview, two elements explained these results:

- The implication in a clan needs many times.
- It is not well perceived to belong to several clans.

71 % of players know at least one member physically and 22% of members know at least half of the community. The virtual universe is not empty of traditional relationships but does not limit there.

Characteristics of the guilds

1/ The sites of the guild

All the communities possess a site. Largely, information that can be found on a site process more about the guild than the games practised. To the breadth of the rubrics presents, we can distinguish two essential functions of the sites: it forms assistance for the game play and a showcase of the guild.

The sites of the guilds propose a group of assistance of game:

- Downloads: patch, " skins ", or rules can be found here. These rubric is rather more present for strategy and roleplaying games.
- Strategic advice: in a rather minority and far more present for fight games, strategy and role playing games. Players propose tactics, combinations, sometimes the "knacks and tricks" to cheat , as the "cheats codes".
- News: it talks about the news of the games played in the community, as well as the update of the site, the actuality of the guild.
- Links: they return to other sites speaking about the game without being necessarily others guilds.
- F.A.Q.: these are questions linked to the game, technical execution problems of the software, questions and replies around elements of badly game understood.

The F.A.Q. are also places of reply to questions around the functioning of the clan.

- Historical: that is to say the history of the clan: when it has been created, by whom, who were the first members to join the clan?
- Calendar: this rubric processes encounters within the guild and between different guilds. It is also the place of trophies. They bring there the result of battles and the confrontations.
- Inscription: a space is often reserved to welcome the new member. The inscription in the fighting games community is less easily proposed.
- Alliances: Who are the allies? Who are the enemies? When such a rubric exists, the addresses " of enemies " and allies are written in the rubric "link". These rubrics predominate in the guilds of M.U.D and roleplaying games.
- List of members: it is not always available, it is sometimes, as for forums, a private space reserved to the members. Often the pseudonym of each of the players is written, then the avatar, or the "skin" representing the player, possibly a historical of the avatar, its rank or its role in the guild and finally how to contact the players (E-mail address or I.C.Q. Number.). Some lists of members are more elaborated. We have noticed that the roleplaying games and the M.U.D. present more detailed lists of members. This is certainly due to the preponderant role of the avatar to the breast of the game.
- Challenge: it is a space reserved to the other clans to organise encounters.

2/ The netiquette

As other researchers showed, the communities on Internet imply a group of rules and regulations called the "netiquette". In the case of the guilds, it is necessary to distinguish two kind of netiquette.

- There is a netiquette linked to the general practice of the game between communities : kind of game's rules, centred on the "fair-play".
- A netiquette on relationships between member and linked to the practice of the game within the community: the communal law.

3/ The hierarchy

39% of the guilds that we have observed, all types of mixed guilds, possess a rubric "hierarchy ". By crossing practised game types and the presence of a rubric "hierarchy", M.U.D and roleplaying games are the guilds that display the most hierarchical elements.

In this rubric, it is necessary to distinguish two levels inside a same guild. The first level of hierarchy concerns the leaders, those who have a power of decision. The second level of hierarchy concerns rather internal classifications that give no great authority in the guild's organisation. In a great majority of cases, the community votes decisions, but this must temperate because the phenomenon of leadership is present in these communities.

When the authority does not belong to the community, it is going to be insured by:

- The Webmaster: one becomes Webmaster if he is one of the founders of the guild, or if he has a good skill in creation of Web sites, or a good level at game.
- The guildmaster: one becomes guildmaster if he's one of the founders, or by a good game skill.
- A council: you belong to the council, because of your seniority in rank, or by your game skill.

In both cases, we have been able to notice that there were bridges between the game and the management of the community, around the game skill that allows climbing some "levels". However the hierarchy linked to the universe and the practice of the game gives no authority in the management of the community (Trémel, 2001).

4/ Human links and human networks

Around this hierarchy appears a human network. This trade are built around the common interest of the virtual community. Here, in the case of the guilds, the common interest (the most evident) is the game. The observation of the guild's rules and the interview have been tools that we used to measure this relational trade :

- The capital of knowledge: the guild is also a network of competence, all the same as all virtual communities, but it concerns essentially competencies linked to the game. Links in the guild are related to mentor for a disciple, until to become it self a mentor.
- The communion: the consciousness of being a member: beyond the play itself of the game, the guild produces a sort of integration into the game and into a playful organisation. This feeling of being a member is one the sign of what we will call thereafter "tribalism".
- A way to play more seriously: the players, especially in the fighting and strategy games, are gathering around the desire to have a tactical game. Links are created around functions and places of each player, like a football team. The game by team proposes risks and more interesting parties. Links between these players are then competitive and tactical.
- A solidarity in a wave of information: the guild is a place of socialisation, or "cyber - socialisation". Internet and the games servers are gigantic. The guilds appear in the middle of this players 'ocean" as ports. There's a kind of "solidarity" and a will to find marks in the chaos of the network.

5/ Two communal logic appear

During our observations, we have distinguished two distinct "communal logic":

- The association: The guilds are networking the players. They appear as structures allowing the playful activity in good conditions, that is to say with rules of "fair -play" but also with competition, contest and challenge. In this communal logic, the links between the players are essentially structured around the practice of the game, and the skills in the game. The guild, as association, is then secondary, and is only a way and a basement for the game. It is more purposed to confront other players and others guilds. This communal logic is more specific to the guilds of fighting and strategic games. It is the purpose of a challenge and a competition that motivate them, competition between themselves (that creates a hierarchy) and against other guilds (that creates a netiquette).
- The integration: More complex and more turned to itself, the clan present a logic of integration. Here, the gathering appears in the foreground compared to the practice of the game itself. It presents a hierarchy and a complex netiquette, more ramified. The membership's feeling is stronger. They play far more between member, the guild acts as a refuge and private space. This logic of integration appears more specifically in the guilds of M.U.D and roleplaying games.

Actually, the guilds and this gathering of players have appeared to become stages and unavoidable structures to play on line, at least for the most personated. It equally plays a great part in structuring this playful activity but also in creating the "game in the game". Being a member of a guild implies a kind of role game even before the practice itself of the game. This last observation is essentially valid for the M.U.D. and the roleplaying games.

Tribal signs

1/ Constitution of tribes around the pleasure and the hobby

With the help of the concept of "tribe" developed by the sociologist Michel Maffesoli (1988), we have tried to identify the components of these communities of players that seem to

square perfectly with this concept of social tribe. The guilds are created around a hobby, here the practice of a game. Players are gathering around the game and around all things that are linked to the game: the way of playing, the desire of progress. But other elements are shared: films, science fiction, computer... overall all the referents of the adolescent's culture. The game is the basement of the guilds, and around comes a common culture, since they have most of the time the same age and the same profile.

2/ In tribes, what is shared create an ethic and values

This aspect is common to all the guilds, all sorts confused. This ethic and these values are essentially those that we can read in the netiquette of the community. In the rubric "oath", "charter" or "philosophy" of their sites, this are modes and values that we find, values linked to the game. These values, following the example of the tribes, entail, as we are going to see it, a form of activism.

Nevertheless, beyond this netiquette linked to the game, players share common values, common hates against Microsoft or against a "Network", linked to an argumentative adolescent culture.

3/ The activism

André Lemos (1994) talks about an activism in the defence of the tribe's values. We have distinguished two kind of activism. If the netiquette of "fair-play", "good way", is so present in the guilds, and if this netiquette is not so tacit as Pierre Levy (1997) described it, that means that behind "these reminders to the order", there are a fight and some convictions that the guilds defend on the practice of the game, for a "clean" game. On the other hand, the guilds can defend more important values. This are, indeed, values linked to the practice of the game, but it is also a "way of thinking" like defending or helping the young players, called the newbbies.

A second level of activism can be observed: defence of some values, values of protest. These values can be seen into calls of boycott and into the transmission of a message on Internet. We find there a similar practice with other virtual communities.

4/ The collective membership's feeling of the tribes

The sentiment of membership has been observed to several levels:

- In the community's rules: players are invited to integrate only one guild, and to play "in the way of the guild".
- The faithfulness of the players for their clan proves this sentiment of membership.
- In the practice of the game: the guild produce a lot of signs of recognition between members : name, appearance (skin), the use of a cyberlanguage, and a lot of codes are born. It is necessary to distinguish two kinds of code used by the players : on one side, these are "technical words" coming from the practice of the game itself. On the other side, these are codes of the of the network, that are really a "cyberlanguage", shared with the other Internet's users. From a certain point of view, the mastery of these terms keeps the sentiment of a belonging to a community.

So, the guilds produce community feelings, a culture of the collective feeling, built around a culture that associates the game in its singularity, some general features from the "cyber language" and some characteristics drawn in the contemporary adolescent culture, these three dimensions not being independent of each other.

Players display their membership to the guild using several manners. On the one hand, initials of player's pseudonyms are always framed by initials of their clan. For the clan *Kill Me*

Please, for example, players will display their name during parts, perhaps on their e-mail and on I.C.Q., this way:

KMP_ player pseudonym.

On the other hand, for fighting games, the manifestation of their membership to a clan is in the appearance of their character, their " skin " Each guild create graphically an appearance that is, partly, common for all members. Finally, some games allow to leave marks on the game server. For example, in the fighting game *Half-life*, players can make graffiti on walls. Each *Half-life* clan has personalised graffiti.

5/ A narcissistic mythology

We have noticed, when we studied the different rubrics you can find on sites, that 54% of the guilds studied possess a rubric on creations and myths constructed around the clan and the game. They perfectly show these narcissistic myth and mythology of tribes: you can find in these rubrics called "creation" some texts, some news, some poems around the game, and often these creations participate in the history of the guild, glorifying history, where heroes are the guild members. This mythology which is built around clans and guilds is not far from the construction " of an interactive epic ".

All these elements are present on guild sites, which strengthens the function of "sanctuary" and " window " of the sites. This mythological and narcissistic aspect of the tribe is essentially present on M.U.D. and role-playing guilds. Once again, this result can be explained by the nature of the game, which is essentially based on the role of the avatar.

Game and out game

The practices that we analysed are not directly playful practices, that we have voluntarily left of side in our work, but practices which contribute to the game of several ways, allowing internet users to progress in the game, to know better its different aspects, to constitute teams, to organise game times or to intensify them by challenges and competitions between them or with other clans. More, some of these games, especially role-playing games, associate their rules with a cultural universe, whose development is not external to the game, and which is linked, most often but not exclusively, to the heroic fantasy. The enrichment in cultural references brought by guild sites contributes also to competencies, which are required from players. We can consider this group of activities as constituting the meta-game, activities which are not the game *stricto sensu* but which make the game possible, and beyond this, the acquisition of competencies that allow to become a better player and therefore to continue to take pleasure in playing. In part, this meta-game is linked to meta-communication (Bateson, 1973) without which game is not possible, which allows to construct this very particular communication which is game. The guilds set up, but also stage, situations of communication aimed at playing. This meta-game is also linked to a dimension too often forgotten, which is the one that the game mobilises resources (material, intellectual, and symbolic) that come from the outside world. Guild sites organise and place such resources at the players' disposal in collective manner. Finally, players have to acquire competencies to progress in the game. They can do it in game situations themselves, but also through exercises or activities that are not games. Sites offer to their members and/or visitors to contribute, through various devices, to this game apprenticeship, which concerns the novice as well as the already experienced player.

One characteristic of these guilds is to express some meta-game dimensions in the culture and even the game language, making the quick observer find out a confusion of levels. Social organisation of the community and organisation of the game briskly mix. Thus, the narcissistic mythology belongs actually to this kind, surrounding the site activity of a fantasy dimension linked to the game thematic. It is a production situated at a second level and

which extends the game, perhaps gives a strongly playing dimension to all activities developed on the sites. To create a community of players, sites creators do not hesitate to use resources of playing by inviting the net users to join them in an fantasy universe, to extend the game logic. If the situations of real life allow very fast to produce a distance with the game universe and to separate these two types of activity, Internet characteristics themselves lead to make Internet a third place between game and out game. If some activities are external to the game, they can be expressed in a language close to the game thanks to this media.

What characterises the "virtual communities" is that they appear as communities with a strong gaming and/or unreal dimension. The member is behind the character, created by the computer. It is a kind of role-playing game: everybody is what he lets appear according to his competencies, his areas of knowledge, etc. In many ways, Internet is a space of playing, at least, as we can perceive it as such. The question to know if behind the virtual relationship, "virtual" meaning without any physical representation, there are real relationships, (this question) seems not to be asked this way. Internet offers new modes of communication where the real image of the individual is not demanded, the supposed image is enough. There is no duty to truth, what doesn't bring necessarily to idea of lie, everybody knowing the logic of the situation. Internet allows games of masks: a player's community can accept that the mask, necessary for situations of game, persists in other situations. Everybody can, depending on his choice, remain in his identity in the game (his avatar), or reveal all or part of his real identity, all the mixed being possible. The space that we have analysed has still many characteristics of the game, articulates itself around the game and prolongs the playful logic outside the game. It's a way for young people not to leave the universe of the symbolic game of their childhood but to live it differently. It's about maintaining beyond the game, the playful relationship, but this beyond has just a sense as linked to the game and to its implementation. It is less an intrusion of the game in the seriousness, than an eviction of the seriousness for the benefit of the playful for the preparation and the organisation of the game. All of this "meta-game", and the necessary organisation for the game on Internet is then stamped with game

The members of the guilds are not dupes about the relations they have between them. They frequent this site in relation with the game, they situates each other depending on its skill in the game, allowing thus relationships of mentor to disciple. These relationships can open on links other than those of the game (activism, cyberculture...). The very subjective notion of friendship has been suggested during the interview: " Do you consider the other members as friends? " The question was too direct and we didn't obtain interesting replies. Some of them talked about friendship, others are far more reserved. Nevertheless, it has appeared that, the links within a guild have, for players, an other sense than those they have with friends "of the real life". Some of them talks about "cyberbuddie" to designate the people with that they play. Others may know them each other outside the guild or, due to the fact of this common membership, and they may split into the true life with its constraints that limit this game of mask. But concerning these activities on Internet, these playful splitting mains in coherence with aimed objectives of the game.

The objective is really to create a tribe of players and it is present in the dimension itself of the playful membership to the community. The player's guilds are coming from new social behaviour (tribes), from a technique (the placement in network) and from a practice (the game). Due to the minimal requirement of identification on the Web, Internet allows the player to maintain the identity of the player including in situations that are no longer inside the game. Sites allow giving a strong playful dimension to all of the activities that surround and accompany the game. Contrarily to the real world that allow to see behind the mask, the identity of the player, the world, called virtual, make the situation of the game harder by not allowing directly to perceive the identity of one playing a character. Appears a radical game space, which is permanently and collectively built by every user, which deeply knows that

this universe is nothing without the activity that each of them unfolds there. It is the decision of each one to play and to continue the game that makes this universe possible. The virtual implies a work and a real commitment of each one and not of the avatars or the masks. Those who create this virtual being know they are not what they create, know this second degree that come from the most tender childhood. But some of observers, non involved, may forget this work, as they would confuse the player for its character. It is the risk for this kind of observation. Internet is rather a universe of actors, if not of players.

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