The Sopranos Meets *EverQuest*:

Social Networking in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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Faydark or Newark?

Being virtual world aficionados, although not of the game world kind, we both tried out *EverQuest* when it was originally released but while Mikael quickly gave away his account information to some students, T.L. stayed. When Mikael started playing again several years later on a new account, she was already a seasoned veteran. As with other players completely new to this type of game, his main reference for how to understand *EverQuest* was the manual that came with the software. According to this information source, the most important tasks for a beginner were to gain experience and make money through killing small animals and to do quests to get gear that slightly improves ones character statistics. Mikael thought he would spend most of the time alone, fighting low level creatures for a long time before becoming a character of interest to the other players of the game. Secretly he nursed a vision of finally revealing himself to the community once he had become truly powerful, similar to the way Gandalf returns in *The Lord of The Rings* (Tolkien 2002).

These expectations, however, soon proved to be based on several misconceptions. Despite first impressions of the game and, indeed, despite what one might gather from the written material, there is a much more important layer of activity to consider for successful living in the world of *EQ*. The first misconception was that the primary deciding factor for status within the community is based on the abilities of your character. While the manual says, for instance, 'when starting a party, consider the skills of each member that you invite,' factors that are not mentioned, like connections and reputation, are at least equally important. The manual additionally advises against mentioning twentieth century technology, phenomena and customs, encouraging players to restrict their use of out of character (ooc)

comments. The fact of the matter is, however, that these guidelines are generally overlooked and signs of actual role-playing are few and far between (Tosca 2002). Indeed, aside a designated role-play server, the *EQ* world regularly bleeds over into the physical world, and vice versa. Over time, the very idea that one can distinctly inhabit ooc- and in-character space has become fairly rare.

Upon first meeting inside the game T.L. started out by handing over some items that greatly improved Mikael's abilities to kill creatures, as well as a sum of money that was very substantial compared to what he was able to make on his own at that level. This conduct is known as twinking and when Mikael worried that others might perceive him as a cheater, T.L. assured him that he only had been mildly twinked compared to many other newbies. Mikael would later realise that players even advertise that they are twinked when looking for groups and that this way of taking short-cuts in developing a character is, in most instances, accepted within the player community. T.L. then proceeded to inform Mikael that there were some people that he should meet. Mikael did not entirely understand the point of being introduced to these high-level players that he was too inexperienced to hunt together with, but T.L. insisted that they were not only very nice but also very useful people to know. As she introduced him to some of her friends he started to realise what it was all about. The thing that tipped him off was the way she chose to introduce him as 'a RL [real life] friend' rather than just 'a friend.' Given the large number of friends one makes in the game, T.L. was signalling to the others a kind of special status for Mikael, that he was not just 'any newbie.' This distinction made Mikael think of how the mafia supposedly introduce people as either 'a friend of mine' if it is a normal friend or 'a friend of ours' if he wants to signal that the person also is a member of 'the family', part of an inner circle. As gifts and tips about the game kept coming along with the introductions, Mikael started to see the importance of the social networks inside the world of Norrath. He realised that instead of having Gandalf as a role model, he would be better off thinking of Tony Soprano, an equally fictive but quite powerful present day New Jersey mafia boss from the American TV show *The Sopranos*.

During the last decades, the mafia has been the topic of numerous TV shows, movies and books. Through popular culture the public has been given some insight into how their social networks are constructed and maintained, how the participants benefit, as well as the dangers involved. Through this 'common knowledge' we will make use of classic mafia concepts such as trust, honour, silence, favours, reputation and 'the family' to frame our description of social networks in *EQ*. These ideas provide an easy access point into understanding processes in a massive multiplayer online game that may be

otherwise unfamiliar due to their context. When we claim that there is a close parallel to be drawn here, it is the deep connections, the social rituals, the insider/outsider status, the exchange of favours, and the general reliance on others that resonates. It should be pointed out that popular culture has mythologized the mafia through exaggerations and distortions. Because we are using these popularised concepts as a kind of heuristic, we are less concerned to make a clear distinction between fact and fiction. We make no claim to offer any insights into the actual workings of the mafia, but we will do our best to describe and explain the social structures and importance of social networks in *EQ*.

This work draws on a variety of methodological approaches including in-depth online ethnography and participant observation including chat logging and formal interviews with players. In addition, we make use of material we have found through message boards and websites where members of the community discuss all aspects of the game.

A Lizard Named Phrank

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

Figure 1: A giant with a (huge) sword.

On the occasion in question, we had decided on casual looting where everyone simply loots the monsters freely as they like but let the built in randomizer decide who would get more valuable items – a procedure known as 'rolling'. The hunt progressed nicely with the exception of an Iksar – a species of lizard people – named Phrank[1] who was a bit aggressive on looting , sometimes trying to roll several times on the same item. At the place where we were hunting – a fort with giants – the good items are mainly made up of the big weapons that some of the giants are equipped with (see figure 1). These items can be sold to the non-player vendors for up to fifty platinum pieces which is good money for a mid-range level player like the ones in the group. But there was one item that clearly stood out among the others, the 'forest loop.' The earring increases the wisdom of the character who wears it and, as an infrequent 'drop' off the giants, could at the time be sold for around three hundred platinum pieces.

Needless to say, we got very excited upon seeing the system broadcast a message to the group that Phrank was looting one of these precious pieces of jewellery. Everybody held their breath and pushed their roll buttons. A female cleric who had so far been unlucky that day came out victorious with the highest number on the roll and we all cheered her good fortune when it suddenly happened. Instead of handing over the earring, Phrank went link dead. Link death occurs when a player loses his network connection and therefore gets logged out of the system. In this case, however, we all immediately suspected that Phrank had typed the /quit command or simply pulled the modem cord from his computer. We held no illusions that he would come back and hand over his ill-gotten loot. In a situation like this it is possible to petition a game master (GM) to come and sort out the situation. But the game masters are notoriously hard to get hold of and it may take a very long time before a petition is answered. Even if a GM replies, it may be hard to prove exactly what has happened and that the offence is grave enough to render retribution. In the long list of petitions that get sent in we all knew that ours would rank fairly low.

While Phrank had immediate benefit from this loot/link death scam, the question is if he understood the wider repercussions from this kind of action. He probably counted on not being invited by any of us to a group ever again, but several members of the group also took the time to inform their guilds that this character was not to be trusted. In some situations people may even make notes about such bad player behaviour, keeping a running list for themselves and sometimes even distributing such information to server message boards. In the absence of strong centralized enforcement for law and order, the issue of trust and reputation becomes vital, and social networks – formal and informal – are

used to communicate and distribute this kind of information. These emergent systems come to fill an important function in an environment where selfish or otherwise obtrusive acts threaten to spoil the everyday gaming experience of the other participants.

Adding Threads to the Social Fabric

As the incident involving Phrank shows, being in a group entails lowering your guard somewhat and trusting the collective to treat everyone fairly. But it is not only the other members of one's group that can cause trouble. Outside players can, for instance, attack a mob which is already claimed (known as 'kill stealing'), create 'trains' of creatures that attack and kill players, or loot mobs they have not killed. Yet despite all the risks others pose, players will – indeed must – gravitate towards each other. The game is designed in a way that makes cooperation essential for achieving success, a concept that has been central in role-playing games since the days when they were played with rulebooks, pen and paper. By creating a group out of characters specializing in different but complementary skills, members can collectively take on and defeat opponents who are equal or even stronger than the individual characters in the group.

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

Although a hunting group is a very loose type of network, it still plays an important role in the socialisation process. It is within these groups that most long-term connections are first initiated, where people come to find new play partners and make first connections with the guilds in the game. The norms governing even these temporary associations are also notable. Aside the issues around looting we saw with the Phrank incident, there are many informal conventions about how to behave in groups. How people negotiate group closure is particularly instructive in revealing the social work that takes place.

For example, it is considered good manners to let the group know well in advance that you are about to leave. The exchange of parting salutations before splitting up can also be seen as a discreet evaluation of the group. If the group was nothing special, a simple 'see you later' is appropriate, but if a member wants to signal that he would be interested in sharing a group again, the parting statement would be more like 'great grouping with you guys, hope to see you soon.'

We can begin to see even more complexity at work, however, by distinguishing between *characters* and *players*. While it is true, as the manual states, that a group is made of up to six different characters, it is important to understand that a group actually consists of up to six people. Each *EQ* account is allowed eight characters per server and most players maintain several characters. Indeed, some players even have access to multiple accounts thus further increasing their number of characters. Since each player also has their own network of contacts, any given group actually extends well beyond the six characters in the formal group list. This has some interesting effects on the game play as illustrated in the following log extract where a group finds themselves in a difficult position after a failed attempt at killing a monster.

> Druid 'Crap'
> Ranger 'Ouch'
> Magician 'Dont move'
> Druid 'Oom' [out of mana, a power that enables classes who know magic to cast spells]
> Druid 'Sorry [ranger]'
> Ranger 'Its ok'
> Warrior 'Hold on let me see if my BF's [boyfriend's] cleric is in this zone'
> Druid 'We deffinitely need a heale[r]'
> Warrior has left the group [and is replaced by her boyfriend's cleric character].
> Cleric 'Ask [ranger] if he's ready for res' [resurrection]
> Magician '[ranger] you ready for rez?'
> Ranger 'Ya'
> Wizard 'wb' [welcome back]
> Druid 'Welcome back to the living lol' [laughs out loud]
> Cleric 'Hehe too bad my warrior and his cleric is on the same account 8('

To an experienced *EQ* player this scene is only too familiar. The group lacked proper healing resources

and was temporarily overpowered by a mob and the ranger paid with his life. A character that dies loses experience points which is the principal way of measuring progress in the game. The character is also returned to its 'bind spot' which, if it is far from where the player was killed, means a perilous and time consuming run back to the place where death occurred.[2] Such a run is doubly hazardous given it will essentially be performed naked since all the character's belongings remain with the corpse and has to be looted upon returning. Because of the risky corpse runs and experience losses, the cleric is an especially sought after class. Besides being those that are best at healing, they also have the power to resurrect players from the dead which decreases the experience loss and eliminates the need for a corpse run entirely. In this case, the warrior made use of her boyfriend's cleric in order to help the ranger. By logging out her own character and logging in the cleric – which she then continued to play for a while since the group was in dire need of a healer – a potentially devastating event turned out relatively okay.

Networking Through Blood and Beyond

As becomes clear in this log, while there are new temporary associations being made amongst group members, there is a second deeper layer of connections present. Within *EQ* a substantial number of people playing together have offline links to each other. After the unfortunate death (and helpful resurrection), the group in the log above continued hunting. A little later a beastlord – a class with limited healing powers – joined the group to replace another member that was leaving and the woman playing her boyfriend's cleric went back to playing her own warrior. The arrival of the beastlord just as someone had to leave was more than a lucky coincidence. The beastlord was, in fact, the offline wife of the magician who had asked her if she wanted to join the group when a slot opened up. The husband later left the group (and was replaced by another magician) to play another of his characters which, unfortunately, proved to be a disastrous decision.

> Beastlord 'Man my husband just got killed in a bad place and cant get to his body or rezzed'
> NewMagician 'Where is hubby [beastlord]?'
> Beastlord 'Asking'
> Beastlord 'Hmm hes upset'
> Warrior 'Why?'
> Beastlord 'Not talkng atm [at the moment]'
> Beastlord 'Cause he may not be able to get his body back'

NewMagician 'Where did he die?'

Beastlord 'Hes not saying i know its near bur[n]ing woods'

NewMagician 'Could a 60 ranger get it'

Beastlord 'He was 52 i think he lost his lvl [level]'

Warrior 'If he needs help i can summon his corpse' [implies having access to a necromancer or shadowknight]

Beastlord 'Might'

NewMagician 'Got a 57 cleric too'

Beastlord 'He thinks he got 1'

NewMagician 'K well i can rez him with my son's cleric and probably drag with my ranger'

Beastlord 'What lvl clewric?'

NewMagician '57'

Beastlord 'Okay I told him'

Beastlord 'Our puters are not in the same place so we talk thru tells too lol'

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

Any *EQ* player who has suffered this fate with a high-level character can testify to how understandable his first reaction of not even communicating with his wife is. But as the log shows, the group members are quick in offering their help. Though they do not have any bond to the character other than having earlier shared a group and now being with his wife, they are very willing to stop their own play and strategize how to assist him, possibly even logging out and re-logging with other characters. Such an example points out not only the value of having built up some goodwill with ones fellow players, but the resources that can be marshalled for assistance. In the diagram (see figure 2) we can see the connections between players and characters mentioned in the log mapped out. This diagram shows how the importance of the social network to the game play can only be understood by simultaneously

considering both characters and the human players behind them.
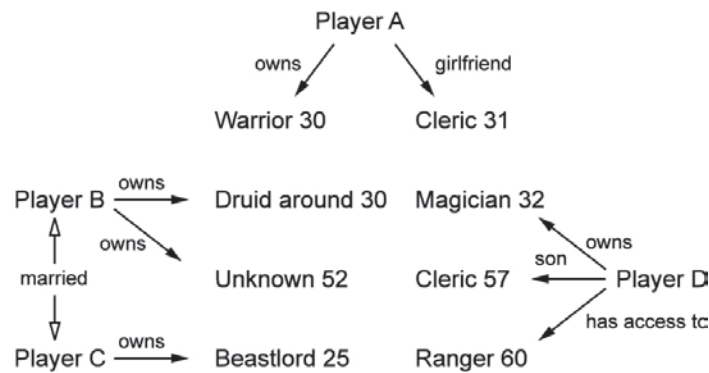

Figure 2: Family ties

The type of offline connections between players seen in the previous example are very common in *EQ* (Gorman 2001; Yee 2003). Besides providing an explanation for how many gamers first got exposed to *EQ*, the offline ties between players also serve as an important component in the enjoyment of the game. Just as the mafia tend to regard the risk of being deceived lessened the closer the blood bonds are (Lappalainen 1993), trust is typically not even an issue between offline friends or family playing *EQ* together. Indeed, a fair amount of enjoyment and benefit is taken in having these kinds of connections between offline and game world. In the following example, one of the authors is having a conversation with a young guild member that turns to the subject of family.

> Dargon 'I only wanted to have an alt [secondary character] for awhile he is a STD'
> TL 'A what darg?'
> Dargon 'A STD super twinked dwarf'
> TL 'Heh, ah.'
> Dargon 'My uncle said i was that and i got laughed at by him so i stoped his money source for awhile'
> TL 'Lol'
> TL 'How many in your family play darg?'
> Dargon 'I think 7 or 8'
> TL 'Wow, nice'
> TL 'Did you guys get them into it or them you?'
> Dargon 'Both uncles on dads side sister brother and me dad and then 2 cousins'

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Dargon 'We got my 1 of my uncles but the other got it for his B day [birthday] by his wife (who now regrets it)'

TL 'Aw, heh. do you guys group together a lot?'

Dargon 'And the cousins we got them into it'

TL smiles.

Dargon 'Well the one we got in to it he is lvl 9 chanter [enchanter] so my 10 dwarf can and the my other uncle has about a million characters on in the guild even i group with him alot and my cousins i group with alot but the group is different i PL [power level][3] them'

TL 'Ah, gotcha. still pretty cool. didn't realize you had all kinds of family in [the guild]. heh, neat)'

Dargon 'We have are only little chat thing set up to wear we get on and join the chat'

TL 'Oh, handy)'

Dargon 'One of my cousins are on now but differnt server'

This example further highlights the depth of player networks existing beneath the directly observable surface of characters interacting in the game. It also shows the ways relationships and networks are not simply imported into the game, mirroring the offline, but can morph and take on their own unique inflection. The elevated position young Dargon has in the social network inside the game is notable. Though offline he holds the position of the child, when his uncle teasingly gives him a hard time in the game he retaliates by freezing the character's monetary support. Stories such as this point to the ways offline relationships, while often imported into the online world, can be upended and reformulated when they are mixed with the specificity of the game and its characters.

Other common connections between players are physical or cultural proximity and previous shared gaming experiences. Most Scandinavian *EQ* players do, for instance, know other Scandinavian players that they have met in the game. Here it is the shared language[4], time-zone and culture in general that works as an a priori condition for the development of the connections – not unlike the way Tony Soprano belongs to a network of people hailing from Sicily. Sometimes the offline/online similarities mesh even more, as when a gaming society in a small Swedish town decided to take on *EQ* together. It is certainly not at all unusual to find groups of friends move from one game to another – from *EQ* to *World of Warcraft*, for example – and in such situations the game simply becomes a new environment

for a pre-existing social network to inhabit.

In both the case of the gaming society and Dargon's family, the pre-existing group of people started a private chat channel inside the game to easily keep contact with each other during their online sessions. In each instance, the network is not primarily used to actually play together. The value can, in fact, lie in having people to talk to while off doing your own thing, helping each other out with anything from information to equipment, and knowing that there are players around to support you if you get into trouble. The game provides an additional tool for people to more permanently build each other into their network. Players can use the 'friends' tool to add others to their personal friends list and can thereafter see which friends are logged onto the system and their location within the world. Adding someone to your list is often done after having grouped together a couple of times with someone who seems particularly agreeable. After the parting greeting to the group, a player usually sends a private 'tell' asking the other person if it is okay to add them to their friends list. There is, however, no required permission to add someone to the list and that person will not automatically be notified of the addition. This leads some players to use the friends list in a much more instrumental way, adding large numbers of especially 'valuable' characters – clerics for instance – in order to keep track of potential rescuers in future times of need.

Guilds as Formal Social Networks

While the temporary associations that take place in groups and the more permanent connections found via family/friendship networks play an important role in *EQ*, the guilds is perhaps the most influential mechanism for socialisation in *EQ*. Guilds, which have a basic hierarchical leadership structure, are officially sanctioned organizations of a minimum of ten players. Like mafia families, they often consist of anywhere from 30 to a couple of hundred members. For every ten or so members there is an officer and at the top of the organization is the guild leader. (See figure 3 for correspondence to a mafia family.) Guilds provide characters membership into a private chat channel, a tag under their character's name showing which guild they belong to, and a special guild hall location in the world with a joint guild bank. Guilds usually also run websites outside the game world with message boards and other community management tools. There is much more to belonging to a guild, however, than what is apparent on this formal level.

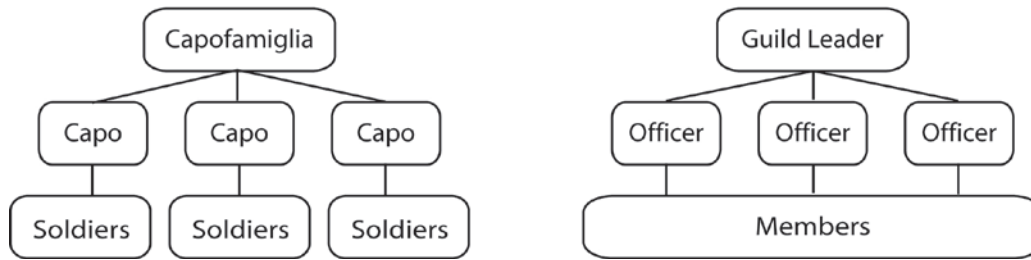Organisation of a mafia family vs. an EverQuest guild

Figure 3: The structure of a guild/mafia family. (Based on Lappalainen 1993, p. 100)

There are roughly speaking two main types of guilds – the smaller 'social' guilds, as they are often termed in the game, which focus on having fun together and the raiding guilds which are defined by a well articulated commitment to pursuing the high-end game. While at first glance one might expect that it is predominately in the social guilds that complex social systems are found, we argue that raiding guilds also provide quite compelling examples of the kinds of social labour we find throughout all guilds and thus present a useful point of entry to understanding social networking.[5] Indeed, at the high end of the game we argue that play is in large part *only* enacted and supported through cooperation with others, often within the guild system. Raiding guilds are high level formalised social networks, based on membership, that work in concerted effort to defeat mobs and negotiate notoriously difficult zones. While raiding guilds represent one of the most instrumental game structures in *EQ* they function as sophisticated networks in which reputation, trust, and responsibility form the predominant modes of organization.

Reputation

As we have seen in our examination of the everyday lives of *EQ* players, reputation plays a significant role in a gamer's success. In raiding guilds this lesson is doubly important; it might even be said that reputation is everything. At a very basic level ones reputation forms an important component in being admitted into a high level guild. Potential members generally undergo a process in which they apply to join, listing their level, equipment, play time, previous guilds etcetera. Potential weaknesses are investigated as in this example where an applicant states: 'Previous Guilds: [Raiding Guild 1] was my most recent guild. I took a break from *EQ* and they merged into [Raiding Guild 2] without me.' And a member follows up by asking: 'What's the story of them merging without you? Usually their is a reason. That reason is usually they drop the dead weight.' In this case the member was satisfied with the clarification offered, but sometimes an officer or leader of the applicant's previous guild would be

consulted for an appraisal as part of the evaluation process.

Sponsorship scenarios are common and applicants are often only considered for guild membership after being vouched for by a current member. Note that the layers of reputation here fold back when the sponsoring member's reputation is factored into people's judgments of a potential member. The better regarded the recommending guild member is, the stronger the voucher. Just as potential recruits to the mafia have to prove themselves before getting accepted into the family (Hess 1998); applicants are regularly required to spend some time playing with members of the guild as a process of evaluation. After a period as an applicant a decision is made. Through evaluating a person's skill at playing their class, their demeanour, and even their broader values (are they, for example, fair and unselfish) a view of them is formed. In the assessment, attention is given to whether they are a good fit with any codes of conduct the guild might have. Normally it is enough that a single, or sometimes a minimum of two members, veto a recruit for the application to be turned down. This might seem overly harsh but through years of experience with the social workings of guilds of all levels we have come to understand the amount of trouble even just a personal disagreement between a few members can cause a guild. The integrity, stability, and overall balance of the guild is given strong consideration when evaluating potential new members. It should also be noted that once a person is in, there is no easy way of reversing the process. While there is often a sense of seniority within the group, a single member generally can't get another member kicked out (though, of course, there are instances in which people 'freeze' someone out). The management of the guild is generally not interested in having to take sides in personal disagreements which often would involve having to weigh 'evidence' of wrong doings presented by the different parts. In general, kickable offences remain in the realm of the more serious, things like stealing from the guild bank, excessive violations of guild codes of conduct, and actions that harm the reputation of the guild. While guilds here differ a bit from the mafia where death is said to be the only way to leave, the efficiency and longevity of a guild as social structure is, just like the mafia, closely related to the stability of its member-base. The guild *is* its members. Given the intricate weave of social ties between them, just like when pulling a thread of a knitted sweater, a guild can start to unravel if just one significant member leaves.

Beyond the importance of reputation when applying to a guild, members also work to build and maintain their status once admitted. People are valued not only for their skills as raid leaders and accomplished class players, but also for knowing important players. There is both a pleasure in the kind

of validation the esteem of the group bestows as well as practical benefits that accrue from this reputation. At the high-end game many of the most significant accomplishments simply cannot be done alone. Getting an epic weapon of the latest version (a penultimate class-specific piece of equipment), defeating a particularly tough mob, or visiting a forbidding zone are only achieved with mass cooperation. Being seen as a team-player, generous in helping with the needs of others, or simply a powerful force whose alliance is useful, can significantly affect ones ability to mobilise resources when needed. While a character might be quite powerful in terms of experience level and equipment, they also need social capital to draw on to progress in the high-end game.

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

> They should be given a medal and a monument for being DIFFERENT!...Probably one of the only top flight guilds server wide going a different road and doing something original. That alone is a great accomplishment. Lots of other guilds certainly owe RoV [Ring of Valor] for beta testing the loot for that entire encounter though... (Dragonmist 2002).

The idea that these guilds actually contribute to the broader collective knowledge of the game is interesting. Such sentiments reflect not only the kind of esteem some raiding guilds can hold amongst non-guilded players, but that these organisations take on a larger role within a given server culture. Guilds themselves come to act as unique agents – entities made up of more than the sum of their members – in the broader game community. As another poster put it, 'I would define 'uber guild' as a guild that does things that the majority of other large guilds on a server can't do. […] These are guilds that do things 'first' and generally create the strategies for BGH [big game hunter] mobs that the rest of us use eventually' (D'Levier 2002). That guilds themselves might become valuable actors in the community, even setting precedents for actions the broader player base can undertake, pushes us to consider the ways not only individual players, but more formal organisations, make up a part of the

social space.

Many other players, however, see these guilds as operating *contrary* to the spirit of the game. They are sometimes seen as too instrumental in their playing style, that they take the fun out of the game by being too focused on achievement which is often seen as acting in opposition to community. In these instances they are often framed as valuing objects or accomplishments over people. In a particularly nuanced analysis (although not apparently so at first glance) one player suggests that the people who think raiding guilds are somehow ruining the game should 'wise up' and recognize that the underlying structure of the game actually fosters some of the behaviour typically criticised. He replies to another message board poster, writing, 'Dude your ****ing deaf dumb and blind if you believe that. NONE of them are saints. PERIOD. VI [Verant Interactive] didn't DESIGN this ****ing game for them TO be saints' (Satan Goat 2002).[6]

Ultimately the guild tag comes to signal a reputation above and beyond any individual player. It acts as a social signifier and locates the character in a larger system of reputations, affiliations, favours, and even grievances. Guilds themselves recognize this and often require members to always keep the tag that shows a player's guild affiliation visible (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Character showing guild tag.

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People often do good deeds in the name of their guild as a way of boosting its reputation. All things being equal, a prominent guild tag gives a player an edge. Generally this is a beneficial factor, though it is fascinating when guilds develop reputations that are more contentious. In these cases it might be argued that the reputation ones guild tag gives could conceivably hurt game opportunities but as discussed in Jakobsson (forthcoming) there can also be benefits to gain from being good at being bad. In the case of strong guild rivalries such identifications serve as powerful boundary markers.

It is worth noting that underlying this issue of reputation is an implicit construction of social hierarchy. Within the guild system this is recognized both socially and in the very system itself through the designations of a guild leader and guild officers. In each of these cases these members are afforded special privileges, often formulating the direction a guild will take and being given special weight, socially, in their opinions. At a structural level they are granted the power to add new members to the guild as well as removing existing members through the use of special commands. The removal of a member from a guild marks a public and formal break of a member with their 'family' which can have dire consequences for the player not just in terms of not being able to participate in that guild's activities and social network but also more broadly in the form of reputation loss.

Outside of the guild system, the question of how reputation relates to social hierarchies is much murkier. On the servers there is often much debate and ambivalence about high-level guilds so ones ranking in the social strata is extremely contextual. Indeed, the argument that some raiding guild members do not recognize this fact is a long-standing bone of contention such that complaints of 'strutting around' zones or acting like 'they own this camp' abound. One player in a discussion forum evokes the sense that the server as a whole might count their blessings that, for a brief period, the high-level guilds were not in direct competition with each other. Sounding almost like a neighbourhood member somewhere in New Jersey who breathes a sigh of relief that the local gangs are off keeping themselves busy he writes, 'Considering the reletive level of peace our server has enjoyed since fu [Club FU, a leading raiding guild at the time] started working on VT [Vex Thal, a zone], are you sure this is such a bad thing? Before you get all pissy I'm not suggesting only fu has a right to be in VT. I'm just saying, when fu/ao/rov [raiding guilds, including Arch Overseers and Ring of Valor] each have seperate goals, tensions on the server reduce dramatically' (bambamm 2002). As we can see, it is important to keep in mind the ways reputation and hierarchy are not stable categories but often the subject of debate and contestation within the player community. Ultimately, this very fact itself points to the distinctly

social context of not only the categories, but how meaning is constructed around them.

When looking at how the power relations in the social hierarchies play out in the game, we once again sense a certain kinship to old Sicily or Tony Soprano's neighbourhood. The following log extract from the public chat channel comes from an improvised Game Master (GM) event in a zone named Wall of Slaughter (WOS).

GM 'so what do you say? 50 people here....all of you take out Velitorkin and then random off the magic item for a reward?'

Brendon 'Everyone who wants in, meet at Cubby [a specific location within zone]'

Jason 'gonna need entire zone to do him'

GM 'I am putting this on him.......... Elegant Statue . Win that item and you will get an Elegant reward.'

Brendon '56 ppl [people] in wos, 19 in raid...'

GM 'lol. 90 players and Velitorkin still alive....'

Brendon 'only 20 in raid...'

Jason '[Raiding Guild X] here to kill him'

Duane '1/2 of them are [Raiding Guild X]...and they're not here for it'

Officer of Raiding Guild X 'No'

Officer of Raiding Guild X 'We after other prey'

Brendon 'we need about 15 more ppl, Head to Cubby for raid invite'

Brendon 'Hey [Raiding Guild X].... would you be willing to Kill Vel with us?'

Brendon 'Unless you are doing it for yourselves'

[At this point some of the players see the raiding guild attack and kill the mob.]

McGuirk 'Hey [Raiding Guild X] will ya plz let us know what the GM gives out?'

Walter 'hehe grats on kill and loots [Raiding Guild X] :)'

Fenton 'well gratz to [Raiding Guild X],'

McGuirk 'Gratz [Raiding Guild X]'

Brendon 'GJ [good job] [Raiding Guild X]'

Perry 'and grats to [Raiding Guild X] must be nice to be the big dogs'

Guild leader of Raiding Guild X 'Velitorkin's Femur is rotting on corpse....first one here gets it!:)'

As we can see, the GM puts a special item on a monster that is so hard to kill that it is going to take all players in the zone to do it. While some of the players desperately try to set up a raid to kill the monster, one of the leading raiding guilds on the server enters the zone with another target in mind. When they see that there is a GM event in progress and the players present are struggling to put the needed force together, they decide to kill the monster without telling anyone. While this must have irritated some of the people that had spent almost an hour preparing for the fight, no one complains once the monster is killed. Instead there is a mix of submission and admiration. It is notable how the raiding guild does not brag in any way about their superiority but instead lets one of the loot items go free, but clearly demonstrates it through their actions and in turn seems to get respect.

Although the different servers over the years have developed their own culture and social climate, there is also a level of interaction between servers which works to establish the reputation of guilds across servers and the reputation of the servers themselves. This is done through websites that, for instance, track which guild/server first defeats certain endgame encounters and through chat channels that span across the servers. In a post entitled, 'Kerafyrm DOWN!!! SERVERWIDE FIRST!!!', a player writing under the name Ghenwivar reports on an incident regarding the mob known as The Sleeper. While this dragon was previously 'woken up' on a number of other servers, here the poster discusses the first time it was killed.

> [I]n the most amazing and exciting battle ever, [guilds] Ascending Dawn, Wudan and
> Magus Imperialis Magicus defeated Kerafyrm, also known as The Sleeper, for the first
> time ever on an *EverQuest* server. The fight lasted approximatively 3 hours and about
> 170-180 players from {the server] Rallos Zek's top 3 guilds were involved. Hats off to
> everyone who made this possible and put aside their differences in order to accomplish
> the impossible. Congratulations RZ!!! (Ghenwivar 2003).

Notice how several guilds worked together in order to kill a dragon that the developers in all probability had intended to be invincible. Despite an initial wave of disbelief which was quickly dispelled with some evidence (via screenshots, logs, and a congratulatory GM posting on the official Sony website), the affect was to create a widely spread aura of respect not only for the guilds involved, but more generally the server. At a basic level, establishing the reputation of a server itself is generally tied to 'bragging rights,' but in a place as social and competitive as *EQ*, that counts for a lot. Beyond this, however, establishing the reputation of a guild across servers now has a more concrete utility due to the

development of Sony's character transfer service. Players are now able and willing to pay the fee to move their characters from one server to another in order to belong to a really good guild.

Trust

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

Beyond the trust that occurs in fights, there are other instances in which players rely on the honour of others. Many guilds operate banks which serve as warehouses for the collective.[7] Players are allowed to borrow equipment from the bank, which has been stocked by fellow members via donations. Typically players are trusted to only use the borrowed equipment on authorised 'guilded' characters and to return it if they no longer need the item or leave the guild. Spells, more permanent in that they cannot be given back, are given out on an as need basis. In all these instances members are entrusted with the collective property of the guild and in turn expected to respect its status and donate back when possible. We might think of this as a form of participation in a mafia 'favore' system where those in need are helped out but later will be called upon to return the favour. The difference between doing and returning favours in general is that it is to the guild that you owe favours rather than any specific individual.

While these types of behaviours are all sanctioned by the game there is one form of trust that is explicitly prohibited. *EQ*, in its End User License Agreement, states that:

> You may not transfer or share your Account with anyone, except that if you are a parent
> or guardian, you may permit one child to use the Account instead of you (in which case
> you may not use that Account) (Sony Online Entertainment 2003).

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

prime accounts. As such, this performance of trust and networking is notable for the way it actually breaks the formal terms of play the game lays out. It represents an emergent play practice at odds with the official guidelines about how people should interact with the game.

Generally account access is rooted in friendship first and foremost but, given the way social networks operate, it is also the case that shared access simultaneously benefits a guild. For example, imagine a guild goes on a particularly difficult raid and the entire party is wiped out. An additional cleric is needed to resurrect all of the guild members so one of the people present logs on another member's character to assist. Account sharing represents one of the ultimate forms of trust in the game and is not taken lightly. A guild member who for some reason told a GM about other guild members sharing an account would be regarded much like a squealing mafia member.[8]

Responsibility

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

> You must play more EQ than you spend time sleeping. We need people who are
> dedicated and like to play a LOT. Our raid time is generally 4-12 PST in the evening. If
> you can't make it for that, Fu isn't the right place for you (Club FU 2003).

Even individual achievements can be framed in terms of guild responsibility. As one guild puts it, 'Our efforts will be geared toward the TEAM not any one individual' (Ring of Valor 2003). Keeping up with levelling, advancing toward your epic, getting keys and flags, working on trade skills and more generally improving ones gaming abilities are seen not only as personal goals to be achieved but ones that contribute to the overall good of the guild. Some guilds even push people to play their main characters so that a critical mass of higher level players is achieved which assists the guild in taking on tougher mobs and zones. A good guild member is what Tony Soprano would recognize as a 'good earner.'

Friends Are the Ultimate Exploit

When talking about game play, most designers and players focus on strategy and skill while our argument seeks to introduce the notion of sociality as a central success factor. The production of social networks and the circulation of social capital proves to be one of the most important aspects in *EQ*. This was an explicit consideration by the game's designers to some degree. To build in social mechanisms – from the friends tool to the deep reliance on grouping and the structure to support guilds – was a core design decision on the part of the development team. As Brad McQuaid, one of the designers of *EQ* put it,

> Community is relationships between players, whether it be friendly or adversarial, symbiotic or competitive. It's also a form of persistence, which is key to massively multiplayer games. Without community, you simply have a bunch of independent players running around the same environment. Players won't be drawn in and there won't be anything there to bind them. The key to creating community, therefore, is interdependence. In *EverQuest*, we forced interdependence in several ways and although we've been criticized for it, I think it's one of a couple of reasons behind our success and current lead. […] By creating an environment often too challenging for a solo player, people are compelled to group and even to form large guilds and alliances. All of this builds community, and it all keeps players coming back for more and more (Aihoshi 2002).

In many ways, *EQ* represents one of the best examples of explicit socialisation processes embedded in a game and serves as a notable example for other massively multiplayer games. As the genre develops it is clear that increasingly sophisticated models for interaction and relationships will need to be developed. The formalisation of larger structures like guilds have been partially addressed in *EQ* but several areas remain underdeveloped, such as the formal support for characters to take on specific roles within a guild, collective information storage, and decision making.

While we have spent a good portion of this article discussing the generally beneficial role social networks play in the game, we might for a moment inquire about its downsides. Our comparison with the mafia provides some interesting areas of exploration. The ties that bind these powerful social structures can certainly also be limiting. Just as with the creation of new identities through witness protection programs, it is not unusual to see players create additional characters – sometimes on

different servers – with varying degrees of anonymity as one way of escaping persistent social ties. There has also been a fairly vibrant discussion in *EQ* about the ways the high-end game's reliance on large groups actually inhibits individual achievements. One player commented on the persistent inability for many players not in raiding guilds (or not guilded at all) to advance in the game, writing, 'i agree there are only a few guilds that are able to swarm in on rage [epic mob] as soon as he spawns, that being said there is no way a cleric who doesn't belong to a large guild will ever get an epic again' (bambamm 2002).

The image of game life as mafia life carries a double-sided nature. On the one hand extreme benefits are accrued through the social connections and knowledge this structure provides.[9] Yet the sense that some remain locked out of the *right* connections lingers. There is an idea in these games of class balance, that each contributing class should not outperform any others, that all classes bring complimentary attributes and that none are unduly hindered or preferred. Getting class balance 'right' is something designers are constantly chasing after, often introducing various fixes into the game. It could be worthwhile to consider what social balance might mean in a game.[10] While *EQ* has in many ways hit a good balance at the lower-end, the high-end game becomes a kind of hyper-socialized space. Certainly one thing the designers have to resolve is how to run a game that has a turned out to have a fairly long and robust life. How do you *socially* manage high-level and long-term players, some of whom are hitting their sixth or seventh year of play? While we do not want to prescribe design solutions here, we argue that the social networks must be taken seriously.

Who Designed *EverQuest*?

From our comparison between why and how the social networks are formed in the mafia and in *EQ*, we have seen that there are some striking similarities. We would like to conclude this chapter by asking why these similarities exist. Lappalainen (1993) suggests that the mafia initially grew out of an ancient honour system where elders were entrusted to negotiate in conflicts and pass judgments that the others were obliged to adhere to. The fact that Sicily historically has been targeted by outside interests has also contributed to a need for organized resistance against outside oppression. The transition into a criminal organisation came later, possibly more or less because the mafia realised that they could use their powerful organisation to achieve fortune for themselves. This pattern is repeated in *EQ*. The strong emphasis on reputation in the creation of social networks grows out of a need from the players to self-govern their gaming environment in order to secure a positive experience in the presence of potential

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disturbances and a simultaneous absence of an effective and reliable governing system. But the power of these networks can, of course, also be used to benefit the group on the expense of others.

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

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

Given this, we are simultaneously critical of tendencies from Sony to strictly enforce the formal laws of the game, such as the prohibition against account sharing. The claim that it is for the benefit of the players and has nothing to do with maximizing profits – when our study suggests that it is a widely adopted and condoned practice which actually adds an interesting layer to interaction between players – suggests a gap between the company's view of play and how it actually occurs. Such discrepancies are not uncommon and point in general to larger, much thornier issues for companies running virtual worlds. The tensions between grounded practice and company prescriptions about what constitutes 'legitimate'

game play needs critical appraisal. What is the proper balance between company vision and actual use and whose interests should take precedence in making design decisions (Taylor 2002b)?

In general, any methodological approach which does not take participants as the primary actors produces flawed results. Previous research on MUDs and graphical virtual worlds has documented the rich and complex social and psychological lives participants in these spaces have. (Dibbell 1998; Jakobsson 2002; Markham 1998; Schaap 2002; Taylor 2002b; Turkle 1995). While games like *EQ* present some decidedly unique aspects, these studies teach us that even in a gaming fantasy environment, there is nothing unreal about the people participating, their interactions with each other or the emotions the experience evokes in them. The critical study of these worlds, in which aspects like gender and race continue to play an important role, must additionally be considered. (Kendall 2002; Kolko 2000; Nakamura 1995). And as we have focused on here, the emergent social structures that the participants inevitably will create need to be understood and properly cared for. In the end, *EQ* constitutes a strongly self-governed world in which complex social networks and systems of trust, reputation, insider/outsider distinctions, and alliances prevail. Who you know and your position within the larger social world is a central part of *EQ* gaming life. Just ask Tony, he knows all about it.

Acknowledgements

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[1] 'Phrank', and all other characters appearing in logs throughout the chapter, have been given pseudonyms. We do, however, retain the original names of posters to public message boards,

considering them authors. We have also left all logs and posts as is, not correcting any typos, misspellings, etc. and only adding notations where it makes for readability or comprehension.

[2] Since the events recounted here, several modes of safe corpse retrieval have been added to the game.

[3] Power levelling is when a high-level character helps a low-level character kill mobs to speed up the latter's experience gain, and thus levelling. Although not explicitly prohibited, this conduct goes against the official idea of how the game should be played. But many players feel that it is a central aspect of the social networking and bonding between players in the game.

[4] Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are, at least in their written form, very similar.

[5] Though raiding guilds themselves sometimes underplay their social qualities: 'Don't confuse ROV with a social club guild, we are a 90 MPH ultra competitive TEAM guild' (Ring of Valor 2003), we would suggest that in most cases this is due their equating 'social' with simply 'chatting and hanging out' and general undirected play.

[6] Verant Interactive were the original developers of the game.

[7] Trust is still crucial to handling common guild assets, even after the introduction of proper guild banks that came with the 9th expansion to the game, *Omens of War*.

[8] This issue is even more complicated as reports of a 'cosier' relationship between certain high-end guilds and GMs have emerged over the years. Some have suggested that various GMs have treated different guilds with varying standards (sometimes quite apart from that of an average player). For example, one of the founders of a prominent high-level guild told us that the practice of members sharing accounts and other breaches of the formal rules were routinely overlooked by some GMs. It seem that some guilds have reputations which may, in fact, put them above the law which reminds us of Vito Cascio Ferro who went to trial 69 times, all with the same result: 'Acquitted due to lack of evidence.' (Lappalainen 1993, p.140, our translation)

[9] These benefits need not be constrained to in-game perks. As one player we interviewed said, 'I'm in a much better guild than my former one and with its connections this one is getting me into a *Star Wars* beta [and] getting me into the Developers' Channel for games – basically a few really hard core gamers and a bunch of good game developers.'

[10] Discussions we are starting to see around how to envision games that the 'casual gamer' would find compelling and playable (versus participants who are willing to dedicate large numbers of hours per week to the game) are one branch of this issue.

A massively multiplayer online game (MMOG, or more commonly, MMO) is an online game with large numbers of players, typically from hundreds to thousands, on the same server. MMOs usually feature a huge, persistent open world, although some games differ. These games can be found for most network-capable platforms, including the personal computer, video game console, or smartphones and other mobile devices.