Designing for the User Experience of Sociability in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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Abstract

The emergence of MMOGs has led to new ways of socializing with friends. Nowadays a good online game is also associated with the pleasure of socializing and interacting with other players. One cannot play a game solitarily in a meaningful sense without interacting with the other players. However, there are still no integrated ways of designing and evaluating the inherent sociability of MMOGs, nor are there methods or guidelines for evaluating social user experiences. Designers of MMOGs are often left to use their intuition and experience, many times leading to design failures. This SIG aims to further the understanding of the challenges relating to the design of the social interactions that users experience, and the way these manifest and are supported in Massively Multi-player Online Games (MMOGs). The goal is to examine the ways that sociability manifests in MMOGs and the way that design affects these manifestations.

Keywords

Design, Massively Multiplayer Online Games, Online Community, Social Networks, user/game experience

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3. Collaborative Computing: Online Games.

General Terms
Design

Motivation
Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are today more popular than emails, according to a study by Nielsen Online [2]. Social cultural studies on computer games are gaining much popularity recently due to the emergence of MMOGs in which player–player interaction plays a very important role. Research in this area ranges from virtual identity, sociability design, cultural impacts of games, participatory culture as well as media and communication. The draw to these games is that they offer a new kind of "third-place" [3, 4], a place where people can go and socially interact, which cannot be classified as home or work.

As increasingly more people become involved in these games, researchers need to address various questions on topics as diverse as social impact, ethical questions, design, flow, presence, and game experience. This workshop will focus on bringing together researchers and practitioners from various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, computer science, human-computer interaction, psychology and others, to discuss the ways that sociability manifests in these games.

The social implications of moving third-places from the real world to the virtual world are only beginning to be understood. All the while, this move requires the development of virtual third-places that draw people to them and that promote the same types of sociability [5], just as real-world third-places do. There have been several attempts to create such virtual third-places, with various degrees of success [6, 7]. Seeing that trying to design for sociability may backfire [1, 6], we need to examine the ways in which MMOG design can

affect sociability. To do that, we need to understand how people socialize in MMOGs, and which activities can be classified as social interaction rather than instrumental action.

The manifestations of sociability occur in a world that is designed with certain rules and regulations. Thus, it may be possible to identify design ideas and decisions that either support sociability, or they hinder it. For example, it has been observed that the play in groups between strangers in World of Warcraft promotes instrumental play, rather than social [1]. It has also been shown that designing a game that tries to impose social behavior to its players may drive players away, instead of having the desired effects [6].

Thus, the question becomes one of designing for the User eXperience (UX) of sociability in MMOGs. It appears that now is the time to examine how design decisions affect sociability in MMOGs. This SIG hopes to begin dialogue towards this goal.

Main Goal and Objectives
The overarching goal is to further the understanding of the challenges in designing for the user experience of sociability in MMOGs. To achieve this, we propose the following sub-goals: first, to share experiences and practices, so that a common understanding of particular problems of sociability design may be reached. Once the problems are pooled together, recurrent themes will be identified and the beginnings of a framework that addresses these themes will be set. This leads to the second sub-goal: discussion on design choices that promote sociability in a way that is not forced onto the players, that enables players to socialize as well as play, and that downplays instrumental actions while rewarding social ones. The result from this discussion

may be a framework that will not only provide an industry standard, but will also allow the comparison of different designs to the social impact in different MMOGs.

SIG Organization

The format of this SIG is structured as well as open. It is structured as it systematically sets a stage which presents sociability manifestations and design ideas that may improve or hinder the UX of sociability. It is open as any person interested can play a role, contributing their voices and actions.

Pre-SIG Activities

The first challenge to be tackled by the SIG organizers is to prepare a questionnaire, which consists of two parts: a set of questions aiming at understanding how researchers define sociability in MMOGs, and asking them to state their belief as to whether MMOGs today promote sociability, and in which ways. The second part will ask participants to state ideas about how sociability may be hindered or improved through game design practices. The beliefs and practices will then be compiled into a list, categorizing the ways that sociability may manifest in MMOGs, and how those manifestations can be helped through specific design choices into MMOGs. Prior to CHI'11, the questionnaire (a web-based electronic version) will be administered to researchers and practitioners by publicizing it through mailing lists, such as the CHI and DIGRA mailing lists. Data thus collected will be analyzed before CHI'11. During CHI'11, the paper version of the questionnaire will be distributed openly to all CHI'11 attendees and responses will be gathered with collection boxes at the conference venue. We aim to gather altogether more than 100 responses.

In-SIG Activities

Results of the questionnaire (data collected before CHI'11) will be presented and discussed in the SIG session. The SIG participants will be asked to compare and contrast the sociability manifestations derived from the questionnaires, and will be asked whether they concur to these or not, and why. New sociability definitions and statements will get special attention in the SIG.

The participants will then be divided into smalls groups, and will engage in the examination of the discussed sociability manifestations contrasted with the design ideas that will have been gathered from the questionnaires. The groups will be asked to distill certain design ideas that may work towards promoting sociability manifestations.

The groups will then integrate their work, and the organizers will gather the attendees' proposals for further analysis after the SIG.

Post-SIG Activities

All the participants will be asked to join a forum that will be setup on the SIG website. Meanwhile the SIG organizers will analyze the responses from CHI'11 general attendees (paper version) and post the findings on a website created specifically for the SIG. In the spirit of openness, the results of the SIG will be posted to Wikipedia. These Internet sites are increasingly popular information sources and gain worldwide attention. We also aim for an article in a scientific publication about the rationale behind the sociability manifestations and how design decisions may hinder or improve them.

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