

Tonya Kaushik

ESL 5302

December 1, 2011

Dr. D. Kovalik

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the number of Americans who use the Internet has increased from 50 percent to 78 percent (Pew Internet, 2011), and about one-third of Internet users play online games (Pew Internet, 2011). Some online games require no social interaction, but massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are specifically designed to bring together hundreds, if not thousands, of players from across the globe into a single game environment. Because players in an MMOG need to interact with one another, players' in-game text-based computer mediated communication (CMC) has frequently been the subject of sociolinguistic research. Scholars have been interested in the effects of CMC on the social aspects of online gaming, as well as the effects of playing MMOGs on "real world" activities (Quandt & Wimmer, 2009). Of particular interest has been the impact of CMC on the development of online communities related to various games. Like their real world counterparts, online communities are "concerned with the formation, development, and sustainability of communities within the virtual environment" (Panteli, 2009, p. 6). These digital spaces are similar to traditional communities in that they are formed by people with common interests and goals who share a common language.

In sociolinguistics, a "speech community" is generally defined as a group of people who share the same language (Wardhaugh, 2010) and social categories such as class, gender, age, race, and ethnicity (Eckert, 2006). Game environments, however, often operate beyond the scope of traditional views of these social categories depending on the type of avatars available for players to use. Therefore, it is more practical to use the concept "community of practice" when studying MMOGs. Like members of a speech community, members of a community of practice share the same language, but they are united not by social categories but by the things they do and the language they use to do them (Eckert, 2006). For this reason, most of the early

studies on MMOGs focused on the language used within a gaming environment in the form of synchronous typed discourse. Tosca (2002) studied the in-game speech used in EverQuest, while more recent studies have looked at in-game interactions of players of World of Warcraft (Schrader & McCreery, 2007) and ConquerOnline (Sarbu, 2011). These types of studies, however, did not discuss the language used in other types of CMC, such as web forums, that are used by many gamers to enhance their MMOG experience.

A web forum is a type of CMC that is intended for asynchronous discussions (Witschge, 2008). Since there is usually no need for a swift reply, forum users can take time crafting their messages, and “time spent editing enhances relational qualities of electronic messages” (Tong & Walther, 2011, p. 105), which strengthens community bonds. Users can choose which discussions to join as well as post new topics of their own, called threads. Forum threads usually contain an initial post followed by its replies (Ding et al., 2008). This type of CMC helps members of any online community of practice, not just gamers playing an MMOG, share and expand their knowledge of the community, its language, and its goals (Estephan, 2008). However, some members of the community may be reluctant to join an online discussion because they are concerned about who may be “lurking” or hiding offline just beyond the discussion (Estephan, 2008).

Research is needed into the ways online gamers integrate forum use with their MMOG experiences. Most MMOGs have online forums that are separate from the games themselves, but no studies have examined the way gamers use these forums to support gameplay. From a sociolinguistic perspective, information about a developing community of practice related to an online game could provide insight into how similar communities may evolve in a workplace or academic setting, particularly online courses. The MMOG I have selected for this project is Glitch, which I have played as a beta tester for several months. Glitch is a new game, unlike

World of Warcraft and the MMOGs examined by other researchers, and the community norms are still emerging. Since there is no research on the use of forums to support a game-based online community of practice, I have chosen to look for characteristics among Glitch forum posts to determine ways the community is developing using CMC tools other than the game itself. How do Glitch players share information to strengthen ties to the game community?

Methods

As a regular Glitch player, I am already familiar with many of the linguistic norms used by this community of practice. I relied on my own personal experiences playing Glitch to provide data about game-specific language that would make little or no sense to people unfamiliar with Glitch, which I compiled into a list. As I browsed the Glitch forum, I made note of how often these terms were used in place of “real life” synonyms or descriptions, which I perceived as a method of strengthening the community of practice. Forum keyword searches for some of the more common of these terms were conducted to determine how more experienced players share knowledge about these concepts with newcomers. In addition, a keyword search for common question starters provided forum threads where users posted short questions asking for specific help; these threads were analyzed for the ways in which Glitch players generate new knowledge about game features as well as how they share that knowledge with new players. Finally, general trends were discovered about how Glitch players and the game developers interact through the forum.

Results & Discussion

Glitch’s forum is available for anyone with Internet access to view; however, only registered users can post replies and new threads. This limited access helps reinforce the sense

of community, since access to the forum is tied to access to the game. Glitch is still in its early stages, so new players have to receive invitations to play, which supports the community “in crowd” feeling of being able to play Glitch. The Glitch forum is divided into four sections: General, Bugs, Ideas, and Off Topic. The initial forum page opens to the General discussion area (Figure 1). Discussions are identified by their title and author. Information about the number of replies and the time of the latest post is listed under the title. In addition, if the thread author is a paying subscriber to Glitch, a pink heart icon appears beside his or her name, and if the topic was created by a Glitch staff member, a graphic appears labeling the post as “Staff Topic.” Above the list of threads is a boxed area where staff members can list “Current HOT Issues” to keep them located above the list of threads for easy access and high visibility. The page includes access to a forum search engine, short updates about the game’s recent changes, as well as links to the rest of the site.

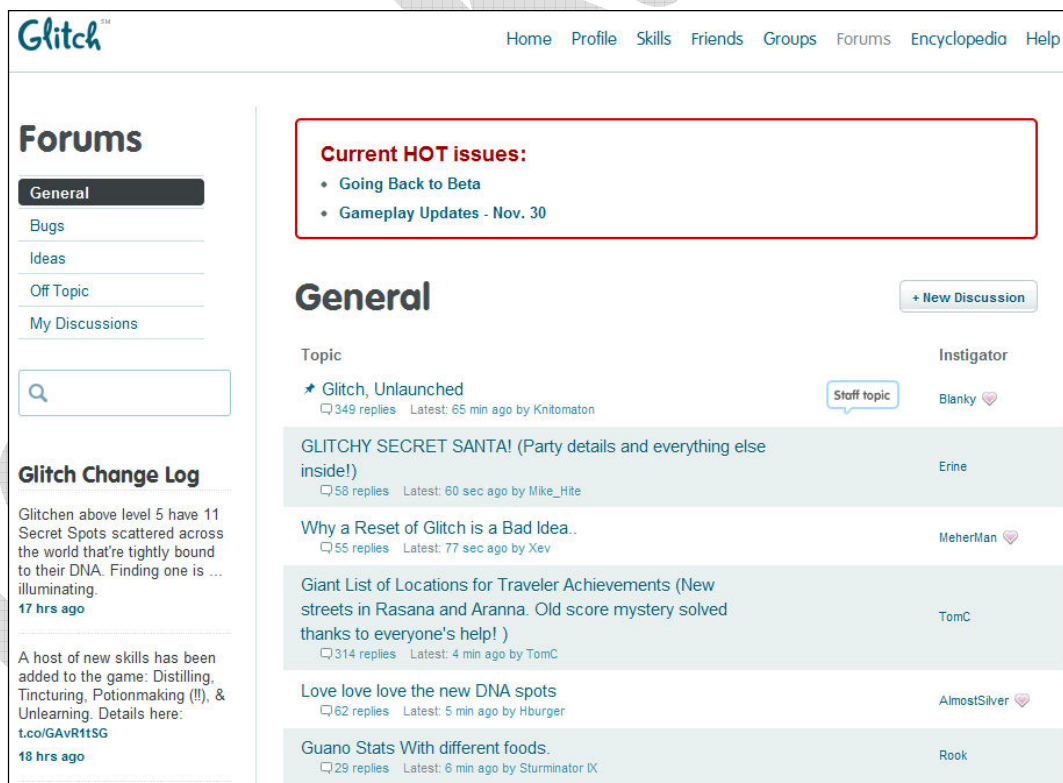


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Glitch forum

Because there are tens of thousands of posts on the Glitch forum dating back to the games initial testing period in 2010, I decided to focus my research on three game play issues that I personally experienced trouble with. These issues relate to game quests and achievements, and the treatment of these issues on the forum is typical of how Glitch players interact to share knowledge and build the community of practice. The first issue relates to the “Notice the Unnoticeable” quest, commonly referred to as “ghost hunt” or “ghost quest” by players, which the community worked together to solve. The second issue is in the process of being solved and focuses on the community’s attempt to uncover which game locations must be visited in order to gain an achievement badge. The third issue is an example of a gameplay question the community is still struggling with: How do you earn the elusive “Make a Crab Happy” badge?

The “Notice the Unnoticeable” quest is frustrating because in order to complete this goal, you have to locate seven ghost non-player ghost characters that are scattered throughout the world of Glitch. However, Glitch has more than 750 locations, and each player’s ghost sightings are unique. Through forum interaction, players were able to track the location of ghosts and share that information with others, as well as vent their frustration. Eventually, the number of possible locations was narrowed to 40 and was verified by players who had completed the quest and received a special item that would allow them to display the ghosts. Now that the quest is no longer a new one (i.e., the actions needed to complete the quest are known), most forum replies to requests for help with finding ghosts point provide a web link to the Glitch Strategy Wiki, an online encyclopedia of user-generated content about Glitch.

Discovering which streets count toward the Top Travelers badge is also a topic of much discussion on the Glitch forum. Players receive the badge after visiting 757 of the game’s locations, but the most traveled player in Glitch has visited 767 locations. What accounts for the discrepancy? Unlike the location discovery of the “ghost quest,” Glitch players posted their own

experiences in a central forum thread, “Giant List of Locations for Traveler Achievements,” (allowing the community to collate the data. Some players even created new accounts to replay the game as a new character to test theories of which locations “count” toward the badge and which do not. This ongoing interaction and the desire to help others is gradually providing a way for Glitch players to check off which locations they still need to visit in order to say they’ve seen all the places in game.

The final example of information sharing and community building comes from threads devoted to solving the mystery of the “Make a Crab Happy” achievement. Glitch features a crab non-player character who likes to listen to music blocks, an in-game music box item. In order to earn this achievement badge, you have to play one of the game’s several crabs music he has not heard recently. However, very few Glitch players have earned this badge, and since many players want to earn all the achievement badges, people turned to the forum for strategies. Threads like “Make a Crab Happy Badge” even describe methods for testing the different music blocks in rotation, and threads like “Make a Crab Happy rotation DOES include the super rare SB-1 block” offer theories of how the quest is designed in an attempt to discover how to earn this game achievement.

One of the limitations of studying the forum used by Glitch players is caused by the underlying computer code that makes the forum work. The only way to search the forum is through the search box provided, but there are no options to limit the results to a specific sub-forum. There is also no way to limit results based on author or date range. In addition, forum posts that have not received a replay in more than 30 days are automatically locked and are excluded from the search results. A notification appears that gives you the option to view the threads anyway, but this appears at the end of the search result list and is in small print. Another limitation is the changing nature of an online forum. Users can post threads any time of day, so

the search results will vary. Choosing the best keywords to search for is also a limitation, since there are varieties of spelling and word choice that may make collecting data difficult without reading through each of the open forum threads – a daunting and extremely time consuming task.

Conclusions

The new MMOG Glitch features a growing community of practice as players interact through the CMC of the game itself and through the features of the game's forum. An asynchronous web forum provides users with a site beyond the game itself to share their experiences and ask for help. The language used in game-related forums is specific to the game being discussed and often contains words or phrases that are unfamiliar to those who do not play that game. Research is still needed into the ways MMOG players used CMC to develop communities of practice and how they relate to others in the same community. One avenue of research that has not been explored is the integration of game-related forums with game play in the context of a game's community of practice. However, online forums are dynamic, changing possible results. Also, MMOGs themselves are often updated; game developers improve some features and remove others, which can have a major affective impact on a game's community.

References

- Boyd, D. & Ellison, N. (2008). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210-230.
- Burnett, G. (2000). Information exchange in virtual communities: a typology. *Information Research*, 5(4). Retrieved from <http://informationr.net/ir/5-4/paper82>
- Corder, S. & Meyerhoff, M. (2007). Communities of practice in the analysis of intercultural communication. In H. Kotthoff & H. Spencer-Oatey (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural communication* (441-461). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ding, S., Cong, G., Lin, C. & Zhu, X. (2008) Using conditional random fields to extract contexts and answers of questions from online forums. *Proceedings of ACL-08: HTL*, 710-718.
- Eckert, P. (2006) Communities of practice. Retrieved from <http://www.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/eckert2006.pdf>
- Estephan, M. (2008). Online communities of practice. *Knowledge About Knowledge*, 112-120.
- Herring, S. (2009). Slouching toward the ordinary: current trends in computer-mediated communication. *New Media & Society*, 6(1), 26-36. doi: 10.1177/1461444804039906
- Panteli, N. (2009). Virtual social networks: a new dimension for virtuality research. In N. Panteli (Ed.), *Virtual social networks: mediated, massive and multiplayer sites* (1-17). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pew Internet and American Life Project. (2011). What users do online. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data/Online-Activites-Total.aspx>
- Quandt, T. & Wimmer, J. (2009). The social impact of online games: the case of Germany. In N. Panteli (Ed.), *Virtual social networks: mediated, massive and multiplayer Sites* (75-97). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sarbu, G. (2011). MMORPG: learning to “live” in a synthetic world. Proceedings from *The 7th International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education, Bucharest, April 28-29, 2011*.

Schrader, P. & McCreery, M. (2007). The acquisition of skill and expertise in massively multiplayer online games. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 56, 557-574. doi: 10.1007/s11423-007-9055-4

Terdiman, D. (2010, February 9). Watching the birth of Flickr co-founder’s gaming start-up. Retrieved from http://news.cnet.com/8301-13772_3-10448459-52.html?tag=mncol;txt

Tong, S. & Walther, J. (2011). Relational maintenance and CMC. In K. Wright & L. Webb (Eds.), *Computer-mediated communication in personal relationships* (98-118). New York: Peter Lang.

Tosca, S. (2002). The EverQuest speech community. Proceedings from *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*.

Wardhaugh, R. (2010). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. (6th ed.). Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wellman, B. (2005). Community: from neighborhood to network. *Communications of the ACM*, 48(10), 53-55.

Witschge, T. (2008). Examining online public discourse in context: a mixed method approach. *Javnost-The Public*, 15(2), 75-92.