

Beating the Odds – The Successful Online Game Community of DeX

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Abstract: In this paper, we propose an in-depth case study of one successful online game community, Dungeon Eternal X (DeX). This user created and maintained game has been sustained for eight years, and continues to attract new users, while based on Neverwinter Nights, a game engine sold in 2002. We suggest that this case has the potential to challenge conventional views regarding online game communities and their members, and may offer indications of significance to educational game design and use.

Keywords: Guidelines, formatting instructions, author's kit, conference publications

Introduction

A long-standing obstacle to the success of educational computer games is that they typically fail to capture and maintain player engagement compared to commercial games[1], and this problem is evident in the case of multiplayer online games.

Current educational interest is focused on bridging formal and informal learning, learner-centered, and learner-directed learning. Non-commercial, informal, user generated, user maintained online game communities may provide useful indications for improving educational game design, consistent with current theory and priorities.[2]

On the other hand, online gamers are known for negative social interaction, emphasis on competition over collaboration, and moving to new games and communities rather than constructing solutions to dissatisfaction. These commonly observed traits of online gamers lead to the conception that creating and maintaining online game communities successfully is impossible.[3]

If an online game community can be found that bridges these gaps, sustaining both players interest and commitment and social functionality, this should be of interest and significance to the educational game research community.

We propose an in-depth case study of the online game, Dungeon Eternal X (DeX), and its community. We will show that DeX, first, is a user-generated game community with no commercial or other outside structure or support, second, has been sustained successfully for eight years, and, third, continues to use Neverwinter Nights (v1.69), a game first sold in 2002 and last updated in 2007. This will draw on extensive participatory experience in a wide variety of online game communities; two years of participant observation of the DeX community; and interviews with creators, administrators and players.[4]

1. Neverwinter Nights

1.1 Background

Neverwinter Nights (NWN) is a commercial computer game that was sold in 2002, was last updated in 2007, and is currently discontinued. The game contains a single player campaign and comes with a program called the Aurora Toolset which allows the user to create original content (modules) based on the game's engine.

2. The DeX Community

2.1 User-Generated

There are three elements that comprise DeX. First, it is a game instance, called a module, created using the Neverwinter Nights Aurora Toolset. Second, DeX is hosted through a Gamespy meta-server. Third, DeX is a community of managers and players, who communicate both in game and through a forum site created by the community managers. NWN contains a server program that allows users to host the modules they create on their computer, which other users can connect to from all around the world through the Gamespy meta-server. All of DeX's content is created using the toolset, making it extremely easy to add changes to the module on the server according to the community's interests.

2.2 Non-Commercial

Neverwinter Nights is a commercial game that users purchase. The DeX community, however, has no commercial backing, and requires no fee to play in. The content comes purely from the community's interest, and continues to draw and sustain an active player base. This challenges the notion that successful game communities require financial backing from the participants and administrators.

2.3 Informal Community

The administrators and developers of DeX do not belong to any formal organizations or companies that support the game or the community. The goals of the game and community are not related to outside structures such as enterprise, education, and so forth.

2.4 Continued Success Over Eight Years

DeX was created as one of the first servers in NWN, and is still maintained to this day. While there have been several changes to the administrator and developer positions, the community itself continues to thrive and new content is being developed on a daily basis. Players often spend dozens of hours per week playing on DeX, and the server boasts high traffic by Neverwinter standards, with 20 or more players playing at any given time, depending on the days of the week.

2.4.1 Positive Social Interaction and Collaboration Within the Community

While Player Versus Player (PvP) competition is a common sport within the DeX

community, players collaborate and interact positively to create balanced instances of PvP. This challenges the common conception that active PvP focused players tend to be socially destructive and negatively competitive.

2.5 Continues to Use a Heavily Outdated Game Engine

Neverwinter Nights is a very old game, with graphics and other features primitive in comparison to games released in the past two or three years, yet the DeX community continues to prosper and appeals to newcomers, who join the community and stay. This goes against the commonly cited behavior of online gamers, that they are attracted to newer games and communities abandon ones perceived as older and less “flashy”.

Conclusion

We have proposed an in-depth case study of a successful online game community, Dungeon Eternal X (DeX). We have shown that DeX is a user-generated game community that has been sustained successfully for eight years; and is based on an eight year old game engine. Data will be collected via extensive participatory experience in a wide variety of online game communities; two years of participant observation of the DeX community; and interviews with creators, administrators and players.

We conclude that the DeX community will provide useful implications for improving educational game designs.

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