# The EverQuest Speech Community

Susana Tosca
Department of Digital Aesthetics & Communication
IT University at Copenhagen
Glentevej 67 Copenhagen 2400 NW, Denmark
+45 3816 8992
tosca@it-c.dk

## ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses the EverQuest speech community from a pragmatic point of view, in order to find out how multiplayer games speech communities can be characterized. This study is part of the currently ongoing collective project "Have great faction with the dragons – an EverQuest Study" at the IT University in Copenhagen, of which also Jesper Juul's "The open and the closed: Games of emergence and games of progression" and Lisbeth Klastrup's "Interaction forms and tellable events in EverQuest" are a part.*

Keywords

*Games, multiplayer, speech community, linguistics*

## INTRODUCTION

The question of speech communities in 3D multiplayer computer games hasn't yet been tackled from neither the linguistic nor the game studies approach. Studies related to language in multiplayer games have usually concentrated on lexical meaning; that is, if people use acronyms, offensive language that is sexist, homophobic, violent etc. (see for example [13]) and the empirical research done on actual texts doesn't take into account the established linguistic research methods for the study of speech communities. On the other hand, the linguistic study of speech communities has mostly been focused on people speaking variants of a language determined by

geographical, professional or economical reasons. A multiplayer game community is an interesting case of study because its boundaries are neither geographical, nor professional or social, and communicative competence is determined by the context of a fictitious gameworld. The uniqueness of this context springs from the tension between communication and gameplay, and how much is language the vehicle of one kind of interaction or the other. The *parole* in such a community manifests across several stages: that of the game world and its various communication possibilities and that of the meta-game world with its surrounding texts: communities of users, message boards, guide websites, fora and fictional narratives springing from the core gameworld.

This speech community will be analyzed from a pragmatic point of view, since pragmatics is possibly the linguistic theory that incorporates context/s surrounding speech acts in a more fruitful way. My initial working hypothesis was that the *EverQuest* speech community could be characterized for being mainly performative (although also allowing for other levels), and the results would hopefully be extensible to the study of other speech communities of the same kind, and compared with real life roleplaying communities (also mainly performative) to find out in what ways is online interaction different from face to face interaction. What does language tell us about its speakers?

## Have Great Faction with the Dragons – An EverQuest study

Claiming 98.000 simultaneous online users in peak hours and a monthly $4,000.000 earning on subscription fees from its 400.000 players, *EverQuest* is still one of the giants on the English-speaking MassMOG (massive multiplayer online games) arena along with games like *Ultima Online*, *Asheron's Call* and later generation games such as *Dark Ages of Camelot*, *Anarchy Online* and *Lineage*. Launching back in 1999 (beta 1998), it was also one of the first 3D MassMOGs to hit the market and has had several years to develop its game world and gaming features, including the release of two game expansions: "Scars of Velious" and the recent "Shadows of Luclin". Hence, *EverQuest* as such presents itself as an interesting object of study: as both a relatively established game world with a devoted following of users and as a world in continuing development, both with respect to graphics and content.

*EverQuest* is a fantasy world loosely inspired by Tolkien (and the whole genre of fantasy literature springing from his work): with adventurers, a vague medieval social setting, cities and nature to explore, dangers to be fought, and the usual races (elves, dwarves, halflings, etc.). It is thus very easy for fantasy or roleplaying games fans to get into the game. Players can create a character out of a quite diverse set of features, and are then ready to start their journeys through Norrath, where they can advance their character by amassing experience points. The game creators insist on the importance of the social aspect of the game, with a rather large community of users logged in at any time.

## SPEECH COMMUNITIES

There are many definitions of what a speech community is, as the concept has been central to the development of the field of empirical linguistics and often used as a theoretical weapon by various authors. In his article, "The Speech Community", Peter L. Patrick analyses the history of the concept and its very diverse use in linguistics, identifying the source of many of its problems (mainly problems of delimitation and scale) at the intersection of linguistics with social history, since the framing of the communities of speech often hides or stresses ideologies behind particular models of societies.

Historically, we can consider Leonard Bloomfield as the "father" of the speech community idea, starting from his concept of utterance (act of speech) and the assumption that within communities, utterances are "partly alike" [2]. The concept has been expanded by various authors (Gumperz, Labov, Duranti, etc.), usually within the field of sociolinguistics. While the definitions are wildly different in some cases, I still think that the main idea of a certain group of people sharing a way of speaking can be useful it taken with enough care, as long as we don't adopt a strict normative position that implies too much rigidity of a social system. In fact, I don't think the ideal speech communities described by the early theorists exist at all. In other words, I prefer looser definitions like that of Romaine (who follows Gumperz):

> A speech community is a group of people who do not necessarily share the same language, but share a set of norms and rules for the use of language. The boundaries between speech communities are essentially social rather than linguistic. [8]

This definition stresses the fact that a speech community can be socially diverse and its members don't need to share a main language either, but communicate with each other for a special purpose. In Gumperz's idea there is also the implication that a speech community allows for variants in its repertoire, allowing for even more flexibility of analysis. In this case, the game *EverQuest* provides the social setting that determines the scope of the community, regardless of geographical or social origin. The idea behind this approach is that if we carefully study the "set of norms and rules for the use of language" that govern social interaction in *EverQuest*, we will be able to explore the social boundaries of this community.

There have been quite a few studies about online communication of various sorts – see for example Danet [3], and for a comprehensive summary of the different approaches, Yus [12] – but virtual communities of speech haven't been a specifically central matter of interest except for isolated papers such as John Paolillo's "The Virtual Speech Community" [6], that points to the fact that social virtual relationships are not characterized by weak ties as classical social interaction would have it (if we strictly apply the concept of membership and other sociolinguistic distinctions), but can develop very strong ties in different ways, as he shows in relation to Internet Relay Chat.

Thomas Erickson has studied virtual communities and suggested "that such conversations may be better viewed as instances of a participatory genre, rather than as community," pointing out the fact that the same term has been "applied to synchronous chat systems such as IRC, asynchronous conferencing systems such as the WELL and USENET newsgroups, and systems like MUDs and MOOs that provide both synchronous and asynchronous communications" [4], hence his doubts about the appropriateness of the concept. Still I think that *EverQuest* provides a more stable community framework that the other examples taken into account up to now (real life statistics about the community can be found in [11]), so that the categories that Erickson summarizes as characterizing any community are perfectly applicable to *EverQuest*:

- *Membership*. All players must sign up and get their own account in order to participate in *EverQuest*, so that unlike other communities where limits are not very clear, membership is explicit here (as a pre-requisite to enter the online world). It has to be noted that membership is tied to the player and not the characters, as one membership account allows players to maintain several characters at the same time.

- *Relationships*. Social relationships are determined by the rules governing the fictional world (Norrath), contained in the instructions of the game and numerous websites. Players choose a race and a class (profession) for the characters, which in turns determines how other races and classes will view them, what territories they can and can't venture into (at the risk of being killed in hostile territory), etc. Relationships among races are determined partly by the fictional history of Norrath provided by the game creators, and partly by fantasy literature unspoken conventions, i.e. dwarves don't like elves. The level of the player characters also plays a role in that a higher level means a higher status.

- *Commitment and generalized reciprocity*. Commitment to *EverQuest* is expressed in the very demanding form of hours spent in the game. Dedicated players spend a great amount of time in the fictional world, and usually expect a similar level of dedication from fellow players. Reciprocity means respecting the rules of the game, which can be "hard" (that game administrators would enforce) i.e. don't kill another player unless in a PvP (player versus player) server, or "soft": don't talk ooc (out of character) all the time as it can annoy fellow players.

- *Shared values and practices*. *EverQuest* players are mostly interested in advancing their characters (character advancement is the main goal of what has been called "roleplaying games" by the computer game industry, I argue). Secundary goals can be: exploring the virtual environment, engage in conversation, etc. as Richard Bartle [1] describes about the different styles people adapt to when playing. The paths for players to advance their characters are very similar: usually solitary quests and easy killings (rats, snakes) in the very first levels, and group quests (more complicated) in the further up levels. There are interaction rules about this, sometimes specified by the manuals, i.e. don't kill a creature that another player is attacking (as you would steal his experience points).

- *Collective goods*. The main shared collective good is the world of Norrath, duplicated in several servers around the world. Characters also have similar

material experiences for example in the way they acquire their clothing or treasure by looting enemy corpses. It is also quite common for experienced players to help out new players sometimes by giving them extra weapons or items from their own inventories for free.

• *Duration.* This was one of the main concerns when considering typical digital communities: could they be called communities if they didn't exist all the time but only in limited timeframes (i.e. emails or sporadic chat meetings)? The *EverQuest* world exists all the time for players to join it, and even if there seem to be no other playing characters around (a fact I have experienced on numerous occasions), the illusion still holds as you can nevertheless explore the world, go on individual quests and interact with numerous bots. The community frontier is also extended by the player's participation in out-of-the-game *fora* dedicated to the discussion of game aspects in various forms (chat, email, etc.)

Thus we can say that *EverQuest* is a community as it fulfills all the necessary conditions, but is it also a speech community? How can we find out?

## METHODOLOGY

As described in the introduction, this study applies a sociolinguistic methodology in the collection and primary analysis of data, followed by an analysis of discourse based on pragmatics, or the contextual study of language. Following Barbara Johnstone, my main method is participant observation, which she describes as the main technique of ethnography:

> Participant observers spend time developing roles for themselves in the group in which they are interested, and then more time as group members, filling one or more roles as insiders and simultaneously making systematic efforts to come to understand what is going on in the group from the perspective of other group members. [5]

By playing the game with various characters of different race, class and gender, I have participated in a considerable number of communicative interactions of various sorts, taking into account the aspects of the "SPEAKING paradigm" based on Hymes and described in detail by Johnstone [5]: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms and Genre. All these aspects of communicative events can be distinguished in the fairly well orchestrated linguistic exchanges within the *EverQuest* game. Since the data can be collected (conversations copied, stories about the characters read in fan websites), there is also a certain amount of discourse analysis techniques involved.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the sociolinguistic tools just briefly introduced above are applied to a 3D game-world such as *EverQuest*. The linguistic interest in multiplayer games seems to be so far limited to glossary compilations, (for example, Talies the Wanderer's work [9]), which although very interesting are somehow limited in their understanding of a speech community as a slang where only morphology is

taken into account (without syntax, semantics and specially pragmatics as the study of the contexts where the interactions take place).

## What speech?

It is time to clarify the scope of this study. The linguistic interactions in *EverQuest* occur through the text interface, easily brought up by pressing "enter". There are several possibilities for linguistic interaction apart from the normal typing that can be "heard" by all nearby players, such as sending private messages to individual players or groups. Verbal communication is often accompanied by gestures (emoticons) embedded in the program or created by the players themselves; some trigger visible actions, such as the "bow" emoticon, where other players can see your character bowing (a list can be found for example in [20]). Although emoticons show a great deal of creativity in many cases, I will limit my study to verbal interaction, also because many players just use the pre-formatted emoticons.

*EverQuest* is populated by large numbers of non-playing characters, bots with varied functions that players interact with in different ways (merchants to buy/sell items, soldiers to protect cities, bankers, etc.). Some of them also send players on quests where they can typically earn a reward that will help them advance their characters (experience points, items, weapons, etc.). Linguistic "exchanges" with these bots are extremely mechanic; usually "hailing" (the official way of starting conversations is selecting a character with the mouse and clicking the letter "H" on the keyboard, this results in a pre-formatted sentence where your character "hails" the other) a merchant just produces a greeting and the possibility of opening up our inventory, the same can be said of the other "assistant professions". But also the exchanges with bots who can send players on tasks are very limited, as players can only get responses from them if referring to the items between brackets, any other question or comment is not understood:

> *BOT* – Hail, Aradiel. I'm Kazlo Naeda of the Order of Three. We always seem to be running out of [supplies] around here, which is, of course, very distracting to our studies.

> *ME* – What supplies?

> *BOT* – Yes, we're almost out of [blank scroll sheets]… Gathlith will be very upset, unless I can replenish our inventory soon.

> *ME* – Where can I find blank scroll sheets?

> *BOT* – These blank scroll sheets seem harder to find every month… All the local merchants are out of them… Hopefully one of the merchants out in Surefall will have some…

This is an example of a typical simple quest. Note that the items between brackets are completely interchangeable, as they have no particular significance for your character. Also, this conversation fragment shows how bots constantly repeat the terms in brackets, to give an illusion of real exchange. Sometimes the bots will compete for the player's attention

by randomly crossing the screen and screaming parts of their quests over and over again, something that can become quite annoying. Bots' language is usually more formal than the players', or more akin to the fake medieval flavour of the game, and their sentences more elaborate. As it has been shown, exchanges with bots differ very little from choosing items in a drop-down menu, as for example happens often with talk interfaces in adventure games. Since asking for keywords is not a linguistically creative activity, but more a mechanical problem-solving one, these exchanges are not interesting for this study.

I will then limit myself to the linguistic exchanges amongst playing characters, that is, with real people behind them, as the *a priori* linguistically richest. A problem with this approach is that it is paradoxically relatively difficult to find other human players you can talk to (specially in the US resting hours, as most players come from this country). It is common to find desperate players posting to the various message boards about the game asking if there is a server with "alive" people on it, as many have the impression of just wandering alone in a world full of bots. This problem becomes acute in the case of players interested in roleplaying and not so much in character advancement, and it is important enough that it deserves its own section here.

## Is EverQuest a roleplaying game?

No, it isn't. My initial hypothesis that the study of the *EverQuest* speech community would reveal that speech is mainly performative was invalidated during field research: the majority of players are not performing their characters because they are not roleplaying, most of them are what roleplayers have called "powerplayers", or players focusing exclusively on character advancement. This idea of players performing their characters comes from pen&paper roleplaying games, that have advanced from the "hack&slash" atmosphere of early games like *Dungeons&Dragons*, to storytelling oriented games, like Alderac's or Whitewolf's products, as I have argued elsewhere [10]. *EverQuest* is more alike to *Dungeons&Dragons* than to *7th Seas*, to give a recent example. This means that the system encourages powerplay and doesn't really cater for the need of roleplayers interested in communication. There are guilds that specially create roleplaying scenarios, like TalynDraconian explains in one of the game's many message boards [14], as generally, the only way to roleplay in *EverQuest* is to get organized with other fellow-players and create adventures with classical game masters. As they say in the same discussion (original spelling):

> you'll see generally the same concesus from all of us that EQ is NOT a roleplaying game it is Fantasy Quake and the only way to RP is to RP yourself for example don't camp, don't farm items, make up reasons for why you are "hunting" (i hate that word uggg) this mob (i hate that one too). If you have a couple RL friends who are also Roleplayers suggest you all pick a server form your own little RP guild and keep it small very small so that you can enforce roleplay over fantasy quake.

[…] And partly because altho verant claims this is a RPG and vigilently defends that stance their definition of RP is just Quake with Levels is all and thus I don't feel their claim holds any water at all. [21]

These annoyed roleplayers try to "perform" their characters at all times, not only by speaking in-character constantly, but also by thinking about the motivations that can explain apparently unexplainable "against-character-spirit" actions required by the rules. For instance, in the Eqvault roleplaying message board, we can find an email from a distressed ranger (Sovelis) because in his low-levels he killed wolves for their pelts in order to advance quickly [22]. Other players advise him on how that could be explained in relationship with his character's personality. Kontan Ittou answers: "Just because your a ranger or a druid, it doesn't mean you can't kill wolves or other animals in-character. Rangers and Druids are followers of nature. Nature gives life, and takes life away" [23]. The message boards host dozens of character biographies with detailed motivations and background explanations, and also discussions about how should a player roleplay, for example, a troll. It is significant to point out that all this roleplaying is out of the game, and it would only be partially evident in-game through dialogue with these characters.

## Characteristics of speech in EverQuest

It remains for me to describe how are the exchanges between real players when they happen. If we look at the classical linguistic levels of morphology, syntax and semantics, we can find a few noteworthy points.

### Morphology

This is the most common level of analysis when referring to language in games. A common slang is a typical characteristic of communities and sub-communitites to a varying degree, and a usual focus of interest when researching speech communities. *EverQuest* has its own very detailed slang (extensively compiled in [9]), partly deriving from the usual digital slang (*afk* = away from keyboard, *lol* = laughs out loud), the roleplaying slang (*npc* = non playing character, *exp* = experience points) or specific *EverQuest* slang (*ding* = to signal advancement to another level, *LOM* = low on mana), which amounts to the highest percentage. The *EverQuest* slang contains a very high number of abbreviations that can be extremely daunting to a newcomer. Consider the following examples:

– You're only going to get a RTS for that one [runed totem staff].

– NP (no problem), I have LOH [lay on hands, a healing skill], but no pk [player kill, or combat with other players] here relax.

To become easily proficient at this slang requires quite a lot of effort, although it has to be said that, in my experience, advanced players usually never refuse to explain unclear terms if asked. Mastering the *EverQuest* slang

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also indicates status (the more you play, the more you know), and earns the respect of fellow players, so it is an indicator of the degree to which each player belongs to the group. This observation is nearly banal, as it is to my mind trying to establish how much do players use this slang, although it is remarkable that nearly all players use it to different degrees even when many are not native speakers of English.

An interesting point however is to realize that the slang is very well established after only four years, an extremely short period if we compare it to the time it takes for real life natural languages to develop in similar ways. This is of course encouraged by the creators of the game, who want to give the impression that their world is extremely "real" and durable. In the game's *Guidebook* there is a glossary where we can read:

> "Ding!" This represents the fanfare that rings out when a character moves up a level. So if another player reports "Ding 18", that means he has just moved up to level 18. It's *traditional* to reply with "Congratulations!" or simply "Grats!" [emphasis mine]

At the same morphologic level is the use of semi archaic language, which curiously nearly never affects syntax. Players are encouraged to give their sentences an old "flavour", for example in the "Gamespot guide to *EverQuest*", we can read:

> Watch Thy Tongue. Each world has its own native language, and *EverQuest* has many languages. It is usually acceptable to "slang" this language with the use of normal English. In general, the language in *EverQuest* is Elizabethan in nature. However, it is acceptable to integrate normal English when speaking. This makes communication easier, since you needn't learn the Elizabethan language. Just throw in a few "thees" and "thous," and life is good. The better your character learns the language, the better the role-playing. It helps set the environment and ambiance for everyone. [17]

Of course Elizabethan English is much more than just "throwing in a few thees and thous", which are consistently badly used anyway, and unlike this guide might lead us to expect, real attempts at Elizabethan are not particularly well received by players. I made the experiment of using real Elizabethan (as taken from websites like the Elizabethan English guide [15], or [16] which contains a wonderful list of combinatory insults), taking the following examples literally from the website into the game, to be met with annoyed questions and mostly silence:

– thou art most beauteous fair.

– i' faith thou dost sing most marvelous well

– she doth be most marvelous comely!

In general, players are vexed by too literal Shakespearean attempts that they can't understand, so that the Gamespot guide is quite misleading if taken literally. The language in *EverQuest* is mostly fake ancient, which usually for most people means starting conversations with "my lady" or "my goodman"

(or the like) and maintaining normal English syntax when not using the slang described above. It is very important to avoid contemporary slang, allusions to real life or the rules of the game. For example:

> – Oh, my lady, I wasn't there to protect you! I am coming back to you to the front gate. [When another character has been killed and the second player goes to the place where she will respawn.]

> – I will say goodbye now, sir knight, but I will give you my heart before I leave… [Just preceding camping to exit the game.]

> – Are you not acquainted with the beauties of this region?" [Really asking if the other player is a newbie as her behaviour is not very experienced.]

Lastly, I have to mention that the various guides advise players to use a language appropriate to their race, for example if you play a dwarf, use "methinks" (without giving any particular reasons of why would dwarves speak like that and not the other characters sharing a time frame). Also, there are specific race languages in *EverQuest*, and players can choose to "speak" in their language and not the common tongue, which results in gibberish in the screen of other players who don't know that language, but this is used very rarely in my experience.

## Syntax

As I have said above, there is very little to be noted in the way of syntax, since it requires a high proficiency in for example Elizabethan language. It is easier to just use a few old-looking terms and not to try to imitate old phrase structures. The syntax of player characters is usually not very polished due to the speed of the exchanges, and it contrasts sharply with the long formal speeches of non-player characters.

> – your right!

> – if you help me I lose exp?

> – just heal you is ok

Roleplayers are usually more careful with their syntax than powerplayers, who actually rarely stop to speak to you if they have no immediate reason to do so.

## Semantics

The most important distinction here is between in-character and out-of-character (*ooc*) talk, as the first refers to the game universe and the second to real life. Even though it is not desired that players use too much ooc, it can happen that a newcomer has to interrupt roleplaying every so often in order to receive instructions from the other players.

> – Nothing compares to your beauty, but this is just a small token, please accept it. [about a ring]

> – How do I get it from you? [ooc]

– You need to open the trade panel and trade it. [after some fumbling it is done]

– Thank you, noble man.

Referring to the real world is done in "extreme" situations where either the rules of the game are broken or players want to get to know one another outside the game.

A character pinches another in the butt using emoticons:

– Are you ten years old? Go back to school!

But what is the content of the communicative exchanges in *EverQuest*? I said above that most people don't roleplay at all, and even for those who roleplay, as in the examples I have compiled, conversation seems to be accessory, that is, you talk to other players in order to get help from them. In fact, most of the conversations I participated in were structured around helping each other: usually the higher level character shows the lower level one how to do something, or they group to fight some enemy or go on a quest together. Although most advanced players are very generous in helping newbies out, usually players don't talk if there is no immediate gain, and trying to do so is met with a certain degree of disbelief. While carrying out the study I was quite a few times asked what I *really* wanted after some minutes of general in-character chat: Do you want to group? Do you want to learn how to travel? Do you need help with a quest? Simply performing, being in character, is not something usual in the game, although as I also said before, there is a minority of players only interested in this.

## PRAGMATICS: THE SPEECH COMMUNITY IN CONTEXT

I have argued above that *EverQuest* fulfils the necessary requirements to be considered a community, even though the initial hypothesis of speech being mainly performative didn't hold after analysis. There is a certain amount of performative language, always external to the game, in the form of fan fiction (an example of a list can be found in [18]). These stories are very elaborated, but none use in-game quotations or point to the real rules of the game (for example, the death of fellow adventurers is usually mourned although in the game they respawn immediately, this wouldn't be good with literature, which is what these stories aim to be). Instead they expand their character's relatively mechanical adventures with explanations about motivations, feelings, etc.

According to the above definition of a speech community as a group of people who "share a set of norms and rules for the use of language", we can also say that there is one in *EverQuest*, as I hope has become clear through the analysis. From a pragmatic point of view we have to ask ourselves what are the norms and rules for the use of language that have been described here.

If we consider the predominant function of language in *EverQuest*, we could say that according to Roman Jakobson's model of communicative functions, language is mainly *phatic*, that is, it is nearly solely aimed at

establishing and keeping contact to other players in order to carry out gameplay. What is being said is not important, as there is a subtext behind exchanges, an unspoken context that people are talking to negotiate game collaboration. It is entirely possible to play *EverQuest* (and take your character to high levels) without engaging in conversation at all. Even in those cases where conversation does take place, some of the features of exchanges as analyzed here (slang to facilitate quick communication, careless syntax, fake antique speech) point to gaming "effectiveness". My conclusion is that linguistic communication in *EverQuest* is totally subordinate to gameplay, and that *EverQuest* is a game and not a world, although we can speak of an *EverQuest* community as seen above (and there is a minority of people using language in a different way to roleplay).

In fact, in the list of features in the official website about *EverQuest II* [19], the future new version, there is nothing about language. Obviously, I would like to add on this dimension.

This conclusion calls into question the necessity for a purely linguistic analysis of games, and is maybe a warning against attempts at trying to "colonize" the young field of game studies from older fields such as linguistics. There is only so much that a researcher can say from the linguistic side without going out of topic (it really has no impact on the game at all if a dwarf uses sexist language, really, and it is not extremely important since the aim here is not to communicate).

I still would like to think that this paper has been worthwhile researching (and writing), as it has revealed the inadequacy of the term "roleplaying" when applied to mainly non-communicative activity such as playing *EverQuest*. Pen and paper roleplaying games are about communication and performance (and we still lack a sound analysis of this kind of games, linguistic or other), *EverQuest* and other games of its kind are mainly about advancing characters by performing game actions that do not require communication. There is no value judgement in this, but mainly the insistence on *EverQuest* being a game, and as such more fruitfully analyzed from a game studies perspective, as Jesper Juul and Lisbeth Klastrup have done, also in these proceedings.

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