

# Supporting Communities in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games by Game Design

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## **ABSTRACT**

Communities get formed almost automatically in multiplayer games, but in some games they seem to be stronger and more active than in others. In order to find out why it is so, We study in this paper what kind of game design makes game community formation and maintenance easier in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). Three MMORPGs are used as examples: Ultima Online, Anarchy Online and Toontown Online. The communication methods, game mechanics and environments of the three MMORPGs are compared and their effects on the game community are analyzed.

Communities do not exist without communication. Game mechanics affects how important it is for the players to co-operate and compete with others and how useful it is to form different kinds of sub-communities, such as guilds. If the game supports player created content it typically strengthens the game community. The game environment provides settings for player-to-player interaction and can encourage collaboration and inspire the players to create their own stories around the sub-communities.

## **KEYWORDS**

Game, Community, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), Ultima Online, Anarchy Online, Toontown

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are many definitions for online communities. According to Preece [14] an online community consists of people who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs to perform special roles. They also have a shared purpose, an interest or need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for community. A community has policies, rituals, protocols and laws that guide people's interactions. Computer systems support and mediate the online communities. Some definitions e.g., by Kim [11] also specify that the community members have an opportunity to get to know each other better over time.

Player-to-player interaction has a huge effect on player's gaming experience [6]. The game community may be the most important reason for the player to stay

playing the game. For example, one Toontown player who was interviewed for this paper (male, age 48) said: *I stay with the game because of the on-line friends I've made. If I log in and none of my friends are on, I will usually only play a short time or not at all. It's the people that keep me coming back.* The game mechanics can be designed so that it supports community forming.

In this paper we try to find out why communities in some games seem to be stronger and more active than in others. The focus is in game design. Things such as out-game issues and community management are not emphasized in order to limit the scope of the paper. Richard Bartle describes in his paper on different player types [3] how the game design affects what kind of player (community) the game will draw. In this paper we aim to give advice for building communities in which different kind of play styles are in balance. It can be said that any kind of game feature affects on the communities in games, but we concentrate in the most important ones. In the following sections different aspects that have effect on community formation and maintenance in MMORPGs are discussed and the implementation of these things in Anarchy Online (AO), Ultima Online (UO) and Toontown are compared.

In second section communication design is studied. In third section different ways of personalizing the game are examined: how the characters are designed, how they can be visually personalized, and how the housing systems affect on communities. In fourth section supporting sub-communities, such as guilds and temporary teams, are discussed. The fifth section concentrates on evaluating the game settings: the world, its items, and stories. The sixth section concerns supporting newbies (new players).

Anarchy Online is a futuristic MMORPG world where the players play characters living on the planet Rubi-ka, which is controlled by a company called Omni-tek and terrorized by the clans. Ultima Online is one of the first MMORPGs and is based on the famous Ultima games. Toontown Online is Disney's child friendly cartoon MMORPG, where the toons (characters) make jokes instead of killing and blow up cogs (robots) by making them laugh.

The author has played Ultima Online (The Second Age, Renaissance and The Third Dawn) [20] for almost two years, Anarchy Online (the original version and Notum Wars)[1] more than one year on daily basis, and Toontown (Sneak Peek) [14] for three months. She has also participated discussions in several message boards related with these games. 14 players were interviewed. The number of the interviewees is too small to provide any statistical results, but interviews supported referred literature and the author's own experience. Seven of the interviewees were UO players, four AO players and three Toontown players. The interviewees ranged from age 18 to 49, nine of them were male and five female. The interviews were carried out in ICQ (an instant messaging tool [9]), e-mail and in-game. E-mail interviews were much faster, but the interviews carried out in ICQ and in-game lead to more in-depth discussions.

#### **VERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Communities do not exist without some kind of communication. Online games should provide the broadest possible ways to communicate. The more often the player can contact other players, the more likely he is to actively contribute to the game's social framework [6].

Communication can be verbal or nonverbal. Examples of non-verbal communication [12] in MMORPGs are character proximity, clothing, house

decorating, possible emotes, or actions such as killing. The players can communicate with each other indirectly by changing the state of the game world [6]. Communication can be synchronous such as face-to-face conversation or asynchronous such as leaving a message in a forum or for a character that is offline. The range of communication can vary from one-to-one to many-to-many and it can occur in the same or different locations.

AO has a fairly good chat system [13]. There are different chat channels for different purposes, for selling items, guild chat, private chat etc. (see Table 1). It is also possible to form a chat channel and invite others there. It is fast to switch channels by typing in commands and easy for the newbies to control the channels by clicking and pointing the user interface. The player can listen to the channels he wants to and mute the ones he is not interested in.

UO's chat system is not as advanced. Therefore many of the players use ICQ [9] or UOAutoMap [21] while playing UO. Using external tools while playing can lower immersion, especially if the player is running the game in full screen mode. On the other hand the possibility to write text in books or runes provides a way for asynchronous and possibly anonymous communication. Runes can also contain information about location, and characters with enough magery skill can cast a spell and recall (sort of a teleport) to the place where the rune was marked. Players often advertise their own shops by leaving runes with description of the shop on the ground. Guild houses typically have rune libraries with books full of runes to good hunting, harvesting areas, and other important locations. Others visit the houses to get faster to those locations. Books are often used to leave messages or even write in-game books.

In Toontown verbal communication is restricted. If the players know each other outside the game and have traded secrets together, it is possible to communicate with freeform text. Otherwise the player can only use so called SpeedChat (that actually is not so quick at all). It is a dynamically changing menu based chat, where the player can choose what he wishes to say from pre-selected phrases. With the SpeedChat it is quite hard to form persistent friendships.

All the interviewed three Toontown players were quite satisfied with SpeedChat, but they all had also secret friends with whom they could use freeform chat. Only one interviewed person considered couple of his non-secret friends to be good friends. One interviewed player called non-secret friends temporary friends.

**Table 1 Verbal communication in AO, UO and Toontown**

	<b>Anarchy Online</b>	<b>Ultima Online</b>	<b>Toontown</b>
Synchronous many-to-many	Vicinity chat: talking, whispering, yelling Different chat channels, such as selling items chat, out of character (OOC) chat, guild leaders chat, newbie help, player created chat groups	Vicinity chat: talking and shouting In-game IRC-client style chat that players do not typically use	Vicinity chat: talking
Synchronous one-to-one	Private messages	Messages in IRC-style chat client, which is rarely used	Private messages
Synchronous one-to-many	System broadcasts	System broadcasts	System broadcasts
Asynchronous	Offline private messages	Books and runes left on ground or locked down in houses	None

Both AO and Toontown have buddy lists that make it possible for the players to see if their friends are online or not. In UO, there is no buddy list, but most of the players use ICQ's buddy list while playing. In AO, the player who sends private messages is added to the recipient's buddy list automatically, if not already there. In Toontown, the player is asked an authorization if somebody tries to add him into buddy list.

Sometimes a player might want to be online so that his presence is not shown in the other players' buddy lists. For instance, a guild leader may need a break from her responsibilities and play an alternative character that is not known to many people. That is one good reason to allow players to create more than one character in the game world. AO has a command for auto-replying messages when being away from the keyboard. The players use it sometimes even when they are playing but want privacy. It is also important to be able to ignore the so-called grief players, i.e. players whose goal is to ruin other players gaming experience.

In conclusion, a good verbal communication system in MMORPG should support using different chat channels, ways to send messages to others and see if they are logged in the world. Also providing items with which the players can communicate to each other asynchronously, such as books or offline letters is a good idea. If the players are able to leave items in the world when logged off, they can manifest their presence in the world even when they are not playing the game. Limiting communication always hurts the community.

## **PERSONALIZATION AND PLAYER CREATED CONTENT**

### **Character Design**

Asymmetric character abilities make it even more important for players to group with others because it is harder or even impossible to complete the tasks alone. In Ultima Online total skill points cannot exceed a certain limit. When the

character reaches that limit, if some skill goes up, another one must go down. This allows the character to reach mastery in seven skills. If a mage wants to learn well melee combat skills he has to compromise with his magery skills. This makes it important to form groups in order to have people with different kind of abilities helping each other.

In AO, the player has to choose a profession for her character. The profession has an effect on how easily one can learn certain skills. There are so many skills that learning all of them is not possible. Also, in AO characters who have different professions can cast different nanoprograms that others cannot cast at all or as well. Every profession has certain buffs (spells that raise the player's certain ability or skill) that are very useful, e.g. when going to combat. This makes players interact more often with others and encourages them to form as large groups as they can instead of hunting alone.

Having characters with different kinds of beneficial skill combinations or classes, such as crafters, healers and fighters, also supports different play styles [10]. A world inhabited by all types of players (Bartle's achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers) in balance is more likely to produce a sense of community [3].

In both UO and Toontown skills increase when they are used. In AO the player can raise his skills after getting enough points of leveling up. The level based system is harder to learn [7]. Having an easy to learn skill system helps newbies to get in the game communities faster, but having a complex skill system raises discussions about different tactics and thus increases social interaction.

### **Visual Character Personalization**

Personal expressiveness should be encouraged to make the players interact more together and strengthen the player communities [4]. If the players are able to form their own social identities, the sense of community is much stronger [5]. The character's appearance is part of his identity. Players enjoy creating characters that can be recognized from the crowd. The way the character looks can carry a message about the character's role or position in the game or about the player himself in real life. For instance, some guilds have strict rules for uniforms.

The simplest way to personalize one's character is to give it a name. Anarchy Online has over 100 different kinds of facial looks [2]. UO has only the female and male avatars that look the same but they can have different hairstyles and skin colors. Clothes are one way to personalize the character as well. Clothes in AO and UO also carry message about the player's status: is he a newbie, a more seasoned player or some kind of an administrator. In UO the veterans are given special rewards, such as special horses, which can only be used by the players who have played long enough. This both rewards devoted community members and eases recognizing the veteran players [11]. In UO the reputation system also gives information about the player's status in the game world.

### **Housing Systems**

Houses in the game can serve as social places to meet people and share items with others. A house can also be a way for a player to show the others who she is and what she has achieved [16]. An UO player (Female 34) said when

asked about housing in UO: *The houses are comparable to why people scribble messages in disco bathrooms: to show that they have been there and tell a little about their personality.*

A player can buy a house in UO if she has enough money. There are different kinds of houses available. Nowadays, after the Age of Shadows expansion, the players can even design the houses themselves. The houses can be decorated. Players have built for example pianos of chessboards and black cloth, because when combined, those items look different than what they actually are. This makes it easier for the players to create very personalized houses, for example nightclubs. In UO housing provides the players a way to create their own content in the game. Being able to share the houses with others is important. It makes guild housing possible. Guilds like to have their own place to train new members, store items, plan new events, etc. [13].

In UO, many guilds keep items that can be used by guild members in the guild house. It is also often used as a place to log off. It is sometimes also used as a place for training together, having meetings, and crafting. An UO player (Male 18) who was interviewed said: *"We use our guild house as a meeting place. It is a place where members can be found. We also have our own [player-run] town".* An UO player (Female 49) told about her guild house: *"There is a large shared chest for everyone. The friends of the house can use the loom, spinning wheel, forge, dye tubs etc. The house is mainly used for storage and logging off/in safely."*

Being able to visit a vendor shop gives the players good excuse to visit somebody's house and thus encourages people to interact more with each other [16]. It also provides an easy way to trade your goods even when you are offline. Famous shops tend to have regular customers.

Anarchy Online has much simpler housing system than UO. In AO, the players can get an apartment for free, but customization possibilities are limited. Sharing an apartment with others, e.g., with guild mates or partners, is impossible because only the house owner can let the others in. This is why the apartments are not used much in AO. There will be some changes to enhance the housing system in the next AO expansion pack, Shadowlands. Toontown Sneak Preview did not include housing at all but a simple housing system was added in the official Toontown release.

Having a robust housing system, like in UO, makes the players interact more with each other – even with the ones who are offline. Creating objects, such as houses, with which others can interact without the player needing to be online, gives a long-term feedback for the impact of the player's presence in the game world. Players get to know other people by interacting with their creations [4]. New communities can be formed around houses and player-run shops and cities. It would be even better if the players could truly create new items in the world (which is actually done in the virtual world There [18]), though, some kind of content control would be needed.

## **SUPPORTING SUB-COMMUNITIES**

### **Guild Systems**

Most MMORPGs have mechanisms that help the players to form player-run organizations, which are typically (and in this document) called guilds.

Toontown is an exception and does not have a guild system at all. Guilds often help their members by giving items, advising, helping with hunting, and teaching newbies. For example one interviewed UO player (male, 22) said when asked what was difficult when he started the game: *"I remember magery being expensive and hard to learn. I learnt to manage because I joined my guild and I was taught by friends to hunt etc."*. Many interviewed players said that being part of a guild also gives a feeling of belonging.

Anarchy Online has a guild system where every member has a rank, from an applicant to a leader. The formal ranking system helps guild management. For instance, a guild leader may authorize trusted officers to recruit new members in the guild or kick them out if needed. The in-game guild chat provides an important way of communication for the guilds. Some guilds have built own chat bots (robot), for instance, to display guild quests or present the message of the day to utilize the guild chat even more.

Ultima Online has a guild system without ranks. Every guild member can have a guild title. It can be anything but many guilds use it to describe the character's position in the guild: such as an applicant or a blacksmith. Being able to describe the rank names so that they fit the guild theme better helps role-playing. The guilds can also declare war or make alliances. If two guilds are in a war together, they can kill each other's members in areas where player killing would otherwise be prohibited. Guild wars support role-playing and provide a player versus player fighting (PvP) system where the players can decide themselves if they want to enjoy the excitement of PvP by joining a specific guild.

An UO player (female 39) told that in her opinion the advantages of belonging to a guild are *"The community, guaranteed instant friends, the feeling of belonging, being able to interact with other guilds"*. The disadvantages are *"For a role-playing guild [disadvantages are the] limitations to what you can use, do, say and the way you can act"*. Only two of the interviewed AO and UO players told that they did not belong to a guild. A guild system seems to enforce the feeling of belonging to a certain group and encourage the members to help each other – even those whom they do not yet know so well.

### **Supporting the Connectors**

Supporting the guild leaders and other connectors in the game community's social network is important because those are the people who keep the sub-communities alive. In AO there is a guild leader chat channel that helps the guild leaders to organize events together.

When the interviewed guild leaders were asked how they keep their guild together and active, the most common answers were events and raids. Both in AO and UO there are different kinds of places for organizing events or raids, such as nightclubs and dangerous hunting areas. In UO players often organize events in their own houses as well. Being able to have more than one character per account supports organizing role-playing events: the players can create temporary characters for their quests and events to play different roles in their story.

### Temporary Teams

Temporary teams cannot necessarily be defined as communities, because of their brief duration. Anyhow, teaming increases social interaction and many players have joined their guild after teaming first with people who belonged to the guild.

All the three MMORPGs have mechanics for forming explicit teams. Both in UO and AO the team can use a party chat channel and see each other's health bars all the time. The team leader can kick out and invite team members. The health bars help quite a lot in taking care of one's teammates when in combat, and the party chat helps a lot in organizing the teamwork. Also, in UO and AO the team has an effect on the looting rights.

In AO the experience points earned by a team are automatically shared in non-zero sum way. For instance, if killing a monster gives 1000 experience points and there are two members in the team, the points that the players get are not 500 and 500 but, for example, 800 and 700 depending on the players' levels. The non-zero sum experience sharing seems to strongly encourage players to form teams.

There are also people playing MMORPGs who want to do things at their own pace and choose when they wish to socialize with others. For example, a player who had played quite a lot both AO and UO (female 34) said that she typically hunts alone because she wants to do things at her own pace and in the way she wants to. E.g., if she wants to stop to admire the view, she wants to do that without others whining to continue. These players should be taken into account as well, although they seem to be a minority: most of the interviewees reported that they enjoy teaming, especially with their friends and guild mates.

In Toontown team forming is very easy. If a toon sees a fight, he can just run there and join the fight and he is in the team as long as the fight lasts. This encourages the players to interact more with each other, but on the other hand, the people will not get to know each other so well because the teams will not last long and chatting with strangers is very limited.

The interviewees were asked how they find the people to team with. It seems that people tend to team very easily with strangers in Toontown and mostly with friends in UO. In AO the players usually prefer to team with friends, but they still often team up with strangers. For example a UO player (male 18) said when asked where he finds others to hunt with: *"I never go and pick up strangers. I look on ICQ for some friends, or just hunt alone and maybe meet people there"*. A Toontown player (Female 32) told when she was asked the same question: *"I just hang out in front of buildings and wait for other toons, or ask if they want help if they are waiting"*. This is probably because in Toontown forming teams is very easy and the player usually does not lose much if he joins a bad team. In AO the losses of dying are greater and often even greater in UO. The reputation system in UO helps a bit in finding out those people who cannot be trusted. Reputation can be cheated, though, and a character who has an admirable title can be the worst scammer and looter.

In conclusion, the game design affects on how eagerly the players will form teams. A MMORPG should encourage joining teams, but also take into account those who do not want to join teams. Good ways for encouraging teaming are rewarding it by e.g. faster character development in teams or rare loot that is carried by boss monsters, which can only be killed by organized teams. Also,

limiting the possible losses caused by joining a bad team encourages teaming. However, a well implemented PvP system can encourage the players form large teams in order to protect themselves from player killers. Supporting teams in game mechanics helps, if designed well, taking care of one's teammates, makes communicating with each other easier, helps loot sharing and protects the team from others. Fighting in teams with others not protecting only oneself but also others in the team makes the players feel more justified [7] and enforces the feeling of belonging together [10]. Still, playing should not be dramatically more difficult for those who do not wish to team frequently.

## SETTINGS

### Game World

In all the three MMORPGs there are safe areas where the players can chat and socialize without having to be afraid of possible attacks. Dangerous hunting places with boss monsters encourage the players to form groups to go hunting together. The features of the game world in UO, AO, and Toontown are compared in Table 2.

Earlier in UO, player killing was allowed everywhere except in cities. Many peaceful players were very unhappy about the player killers [13]. If the game aims to attract wide audience, the players should be able to choose if they wish to participate PvP and it should be a feature for more advanced players [7]. Still, because its good to have different player types in the game [3], PvP should not be completely prohibited. Later, when the Renaissance version of UO was released, the world was divided into two parts. The other part is Trammel, where no player killing is allowed and the other is Felucca where it is allowed outside the cities. Most of the people moved to Trammel. One can, however, also argue that it was only because the players typically try to maximize the profit. Earning money in Trammel is faster.

Player killing did not end in Trammel. Some players, often called looters, lure monsters on people who are hunting in some dangerous location and hide themselves, wait until it is safe to loot their dead corpses, and steal their equipment. It seems that if there is violence in the game, grief players find ways to get other players killed. Even in Toontown, where player killing is strictly prohibited, sometimes grief players try to push sleeping toons on the way of the cogs so that they will get killed [7].

It should be easy and fast for the players to go to where their friends are in order to make player-to-player interaction easier and more frequent. Also finding one's way in the game world should be easy. In UO this seems to be a problem sometimes, since the game does not provide a world map. The players often use an external tool, UOAutoMap, for showing one's location in the game world. One interviewed UO player (female 49) told that: "*I installed UOAutoMap after I spent two weeks dead and lost because I could not find my way back to a town*".

**Table 2 Features of the UO's, AO's and Toontown's game worlds**

	<b>Ultima Online</b>	<b>Anarchy Online</b>	<b>Toontown</b>
Getting from place to another	Easy if enough skills and resources otherwise slow	Moderately fast but requires knowledge	Fast free teleportation
World map available	Only small map	Yes	Yes
World size	Large	Large	Small
Player-killing	In another copy of the game world.	Only in certain areas.	Prohibited

In AO, people who are in the same level range often gather in certain places in order to form groups for missions or hunting. These places change over time and especially for the newbies it is hard to know where to find them. One way to solve this problem could be to show in the world map where the people are and even allow the players teleport easily there like in the virtual world There [18].

Players can request dynamically generated missions in AO. A single player or a player group can enter a mission and anyone who wishes to join them must have a key. Missions have at the time of this being written quite nice rewards and loot and that is why most of the players choose indoor missions instead of hunting in public places. Missions can last for hours in the higher levels. The mission area isolates the groups for a long time from the other people. This reduces probability of such things as kill stealing (stealing somebody's prey) and ninja looting (stealing somebody's loot) and other kind of griefing. The downside is that it reduces interaction with other players because groups are limited to six people and it is not possible to meet new people in mission areas. Missions may begin to feel boring in the long run.

### **Game Story**

A conflict that is communicated to the players by story makes player's actions more meaningful and ties those belonging to the same faction more together. Working for a common goal is important factor in creating a sense of community [10]. Some players do not care at all about the story behind the game, but especially for role-players, it is important, since it provides settings for their own stories.

In Anarchy Online and Toontown the story gives settings for a conflict more clearly than in UO. In AO the players have at least some effect on the game story and it is evolving in time. For example, a Neutral organization in Anarchy Online paid in-game money to hire thugs in a Neutral city to kill the people who belong to Clans. That is why nowadays it is quite difficult for Clans men and women to sneak into that city. If the players feel that they change the direction of the game story, it makes the story more important for them.

### **Hidden Information**

If the game designers leave intentional holes in the concepts the players are likely to share strategy guides, maps etc. [6]. Different strategies, tactics and secret information give the players more reasons to discuss with their fellow players. Nevertheless, unintentional holes in game design often lead to exploiting. Both AO and UO have many player created tools and discussing about fighting tactics or skill choices is common.

### **Items and Crafting**

Rare or special items give people reasons to talk. For instance, players may ask where someone has got a special magic sword or item that they have not ever seen anywhere else. Having public houses makes it easy to show those items to others. It is important to give people reasons to discuss with each other in online games. [16]

Items can support role-playing. Many players utilize food and drinks in parties. In UO drinking even has a real effect on the character: the character starts to say "hic" all the time and when he gets drunk enough he also looks like vomiting and his mana (magical energy) goes down so he can not cast spells. Eating is rumored to have an effect on players succeeding in skills and learning. In AO food and drinks are just for show.

Being able to craft useful items makes the economy in the game more interesting and encourages co-operating. Both AO and UO support so called safe trading where both of the traders see what they get and the trade cannot be changed after one of the traders has accepted the trade. In UO blacksmiths and other crafters often run their own shops or have their vendors in somebody else's shop. Fighters need crafters in UO and AO because the players can make better equipment than what is sold in the NPC (Non-Player Character) shops. Guilds often have their own crafters to ensure cheap or free supply of those items. In UO the crafting skills get better when the crafter uses them, but in AO the crafter needs to gain experience points to be able to raise his crafting skills. Gaining experience points by crafting is quite slow in AO and the game was changed so that the last experience points for a level cannot be earned by crafting. That is why being a pure crafter is hard in AO.

Harvesting the raw materials for crafting can also encourage teamwork [15]. For example, in UO some of the mining locations are in dangerous areas and the miner may need assistance from a fighter to be able to mine. In AO achieving raw materials for some items is very dangerous and sometimes it takes even two or more teams to kill the monsters, which drop those raw materials as loot.

In Toontown there is no crafting system. The players cannot even give each other items. Thus, trading the items would not be possible either. This reduces the possibilities of helping others but on the other hand reduces possibilities of scamming and losing valuables because of ignorance.

In conclusion, providing rare or unique items gives the players reasons to interact more with each other. Crafting and trading should be supported in order to encourage co-operation and support other play styles than just fighting.

## **SUPPORTING NEWBIES**

### **Learning Curve**

If the game is easy to learn, it is much more likely that the newbies decide to stay with the game [13] and the game is more likely to reach or maintain its critical mass of players. It would be ideal if the game were easy to learn but hard to master so that it would still be fun to play it after a few years.

Toontown is quite a simple game that is easy to learn. It has an excellent tutorial that gives the player more user interface controls little by little. The tutorial is mandatory but it does not take too long and it is part of the actual game play. After completing the tutorial the player has quite a good idea about how to do things in the game and what the player is supposed to do. Providing a short tutorial that is part of the actual game play helps the player to get started. It would be even better to have human mentor helping the player when he starts to play the game. A good example how it can be implemented is a MMORPG a Tale in the Desert [17], where one of the player's goals is to be a mentor. The mentor is rewarded if the mentored player agrees that he was a good one.

Both UO and AO are more complex games than Toontown. Neither of them has tutorials. AO has included after its initial release more help for newbies, such as help pop-ups that can be disabled and tutor NPCs in newbie areas. Both in UO and AO newbies start in fairly crowded locations where other newbies can be found. That is good, because in that way they can seek help from the others.

### **Balance Between Newbies and Veterans**

Implementing a game where newbies and veterans can hunt and compete meaningfully together is challenging. It is worth trying, though, because if the newbies and veterans interact more, the veterans can teach newbies more easily and the player-to-player interaction is not restricted by player expertise.

In Toontown it is quite common to see people of different levels of skills teaming up together. Sometimes the more dangerous areas and more difficult tasks can be deadly for newbies, but the fights are balanced so that the cogs tend to hit more the more experienced toon [7]. The mini-games in Toontown are designed so that the character's skills do not matter at all and newbies and veterans can play together. In AO and UO it is not as common to see newbies and veterans to hunt together because the hunting areas that are good for the veterans are usually deadly for the newbies. In AO the newbie characters will not gain any experience if they group with players who are in too high a level.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The results of the interviews supported the information in the referred literature about online game communities. There seemed to be one difference though: some players claimed that being able to play sometimes alone or at one's own pace in MMORPGs is important, too. In AO and UO the feeling of belonging to a game community seems to be stronger than in Toontown, because in Toontown communication is so limited.

Ease of communication is important. It should be easy to find other players and get to where they are in order to make player-to-player interaction more

frequent. Making the player-run organizations official by supporting them in game mechanics makes sub-community management easier. If the players have more reasons to discuss about special items, monsters, and strategies it makes the players interact more with each other. Such things can be icebreakers, too, and help in forming new friendships. Players should also be able to express themselves by customizing their avatars and creating their own content. Housing systems support both player created content and sub-community formation. The game should be easy to learn so that newbies can get easily inside the communities and stay more probably with the game. Also, a wide range of roles should be available in order to support different play styles.

The players often seem to create their own tools or utilize other external tools for the features that the game is lacking, such as finding one's way around the world or chatting. Creation of such tools is proof of existence of players who really care about the game, but also proof of design defects or deficiencies.

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