VIRTUAL SOCIAL LIFE AND RELATED MARKETING EFFORTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMES

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Abstract

As the Internet and the World Wide Web proliferate, a new form of communication and interaction has been made possible. People live increasingly hybrid lives where the physical and the digital, the real and the virtual interact. Massively multiplayer online role - playing games (MMORPGs), i.e. online role playing games, are a special medial and social phenomenon of our time and experienced a massive growth of players. Studies reveal that mmorpg players compose a heterogenic population and spend considerable amount of time in the virtual world. Extensive interest in the virtual world makes way for a new entertainment market and supplementary environments such as game forums, chat points and specialized web sites. On the other hand while the market shares of game based networks are increasing dependence and addiction become an important issue.

This research concentrates on game oriented social life and related markets in this phase and tries to describe the framework of internet based virtual communications, game based online markets, game memberships, forums and virtual chat points with regard to effects on social life in the global frame as well as mentioning Turkey's position.

Key Words: *Mmorpgs, game based social life, online game marketing, game forums, virtual chat.*

Jel Classification: L86, M31

1. INTRODUCTION

As the Internet and the World Wide Web proliferate, a new form of communication and interaction has been made possible. Mobile games support people to live hybrid lives where the physical and the digital, the real and the virtual. The virtual environments could be perceived more real with the help of the technological facilities.

Mobile games create virtual social life while connecting player with the other players on the internet and these games give opportunity to make friend through the games. Massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), i.e. online role playing games (RPG), are

social phenomenons of our time and experienced a massive growth of players. Studies reveal that MMORPG players compose a heterogenic population and spend considerable amount of time in the virtual world. Extensive interest in the virtual world makes way for a new entertainment market and supplementary environments such as game forums, chat points and specialized web sites.

There are various phases related to business models throughout the mobile games evolution. In the first phase, online games released free for trial then gamers will asked to pay subscription fees to continue playing. In the following phase, gamers play free and pay only for associated game materials that they can buy through the games which can be listed as; special weapons, avatars, virtual items (Boom for Mobile Games, 2006).

According to popular online game web page called gameogre.com, most famous games including MMORPG, online RPG, online strategy, and online shooter genres are listed below; World of Warcraft with over 10 million subscribers, Counter-Strike: Source, Guild Wars which is the popular free game online MMORPG after World of Warcraft, Team Fortress 2; innovated the shooter genre with cartoonish graphics with free game playing , RuneScape and Second Life.

While the market shares of game based networks are increasing dependence and addiction becomes an important issue, there are available dangers of online media for the children and teenagers such as; explicit of sexual materials, identity formation and protection concerns, cyber bullying (Withaker & Bushman, 2009).

Besides, online games could support players for formal training and could be used as learning tool (De Freitas, 2007) . Also, games can be viewed as social learning (Steinkuehler, 2006). While playing with the teams throughout the online games they can quickly examine their movements' consequences and gamers could be the part of cooperative learning (O'Connor & Menaker, 2008);

Individual Accountability: Every gamer responsible for his/her part during the play for accomplishing the game

Teamwork skills; They should act like a team that establishes to move as a single entity and develop teamwork skills.

Group Processing; All the game players should think how to improve their situation.

The additional outcomes of the virtual multiplayer games can be declared that they increase the visual attraction and attention to training content with greater retention through the training based games (Ricci, Salas, Cannon-Bowers, & A., 1996).

Social network portals and online games arrange a platform to communicate with each other, in this level, the impression management step starts for the players and social network partners. Impression management consists of creating a profile for fascinating the others in these networks with posting personal information through these networks also the impression of the avatars can be used during these process (Withaker & Bushman, 2009).

 "An Avatar is a graphical representation of the user in a particular online environment" (Nowak & Rauh, 2006). Gamers use avatars to reflect their profiles throughout the online games. They use them for their identity formation and they can create psychological connection to their avatars by using them as a vehicle to interact with the other players through online games.

Moreover, online games can use haptic devices during the game playing; haptic devices can simulate the feel of touch with devices and support the feeling real environment while you are in the virtual one. Today, online games supports haptic devices and we should not estimate the power of touch during the social interactions, as you know; touch increases the trust (J., 1991).

This research concentrates on game oriented social life and related markets in this phase and tries to describe the framework of internet based virtual communications, game based online markets, game memberships, forums and virtual chat points with regard to effects on social life in the global frame as well as mentioning Turkey's position.

2. MARKETING POWER

For better understanding online game marketing, first of all we have to examine which materials can be purchased throughout the game play and the details of these materials related to the game. "Second life" named online game player is a very popular game and could be a good example for listing the materials which can be commercial in the game.

Besides, Second Life, as a game, could be described as a digital world created by its residents. In the game, players can construct and create content with using avatars such as; cities houses, shops and etc and retain the property rights and can sell, exchange what they build in Second Life. Also, they can sell their avatars through the game. For instances, in 2009 there are 21,332 islands that serves a different purpose in the game such as education, or represents business in various areas, including fashion, music, art, and marketing. Also, avatars can teleport from one island to another and communicating through text chats, IMs, and voice chats. 98 million square meters of land were sold at the average price of L$2/m2 in 2008. ($1US = L$270). Many companies can do virtual commerce in which virtual services and products are sold and traded with others (Schiller).

3. ROOTS OF VIRTUAL SOCIAL LIFE

The roots of virtual social life, surprisingly to some, are deeper than many of us assume. Our research reveals that while not glorious and crowded like modern MMORPG's or MMOG's, pioneers of online games also had their days. Those pioneer games are called MUD's and they are around for some 35 years. MUD, (the acronym stand for Multi-User Dungeon or Dimension) is basically an online world where users interact with each other and the game world (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MUD#Psychology_and_engagement).

While different versions of MUDs gain more and more popularity among university students, the acronym for MUD often deliberately misspelled "Multi Undergraduate Destroyer" due to MUDs' popularity among college students and the amount of time devoted to them. High numbers of students have failed their classes due to too much time spent playing MUDs (Bartle, 2003).

Misspelling the name of the first generation of online games and therefore the primitive virtual social life is nothing but a suave irony compared to today's institutional criticism towards contemporary online game scene. In our day a prominent and advancing body of literature is focused on virtual social life.

3.1. Different Approaches to Virtual Social Life

Literature review revels that there is a continuing debate about whether virtual social life is a constructing or a damaging environment. Both sides have their own arguments backed with arguably tangible data. The important thing is results of those researches are mostly contextual and

hard to generalize. Continuing part of our work discuss the fundamental points of the debate over virtual social life.

3.1.1. Supporting views

Studies emphasizing the constructive aspects of virtual worlds generally focused on three different uses. Education, work possibilities and cultural participation are considered as redeeming uses of virtual worlds.

3.1.1.1. Education

Most of the studies that approach virtual world from a supportive angle emphasize its educational possibilities. Infact educators and researchers are among the first to adopt virtual worlds in order to examine their capabilities for education (Schiller, 2009). An expert of new media indicates that over the past two years, an estimated 4.000 educational projects have emerged within Second Life alone depicting the possibilities of the emerging context (http://wp.nmc.org/mrpixel).

3.1.1.2. Work Possibilities

Interaction and collaboration are two basic condition for any work context and virtual worlds are obviously providing environmentally-friendly and cost-effective ways for those conditions.

3.1.1.3. Cultural Participation

Profit-driven organizations are not alone in exploiting virtual social life. Nonprofit institutions also benefit from virtual worlds. Attendance at virtual art museums in Second Life is growing rapidly and museum curators are particularly excited by the length of the average stay of visitors (Bloomfield, Duranske, 2009). As a matter of fact regardless of profit institutions take advantage of the same opportunity: possibility to create user-generated content.

3.2. Adverse views

Arguments that stress the dangerous and damaging sides of virtual words focus mainly on three different aspects. Exposure to explicit material, internet addiction and economic exploitation are prominent factors that adverse views argue.

3.2.1. Exposure to explicit material

The two most common ways in which children can be exposed online to sexually explicit material are through personal sexual solicitation or through viewing pornographic material (Whitaker, Bushman, 2009). Since the visual realism of virtual worlds are increasingly coming close to real world, possibility of depicting virtual sexual situations and imagery is not an unthinkable progression.

3.2.2. Internet Addiction

Internet addiction is a concept of recent years and like other kinds of addictions it resembles itself with certain types of behaviours. being online for long periods of time, viewing online pornography, gambling online or compulsively playing MMOGs are typical behaviours of internet addiction (Whitaker, Bushman; 2009).

3.2.3. Economic Exploitation

Integration of virtual and real worlds causes conversion of virtual goods into real. This situation makes it inevitable that sophisticated users will take advantage of children (Bloomfield, Duranske, 2009). "Gold Farming" is a term that defines extremely repetitive tasks that allow characters in MMOGs to acquire virtual goods and skills that can be transferred (Dibbel, 2006). Children and adolescents are carelessly employed to farm gold especially in developing countries.

4. EFFECTS OF VIRTUAL WORLDS TO HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Internet and World Wide Web have a great impact in social life and alter perceptions of people like any other revolution did in the past. Today people live in a world where the real and the virtual blend together. Jordan (2009) uses the term "hybrid spaces" in order to define the world where the boundaries between physical and digital fade or blur. In the world of hybrid spaces identities, personalities, experiences and therefore consciousness are shared between real and the virtual world.

Jordan (2009) asserts that the blurring boundaries between real and the virtual require rethinking of conventional approaches to anthropology. In today's context where a growingly large population lives life composed of both physical and digital realities, it is inevitable for any discipline of social science to ignore the dualism of social life. Problems like "how digital revolution affects people as professionals, family members and social sharer?" are to be answered by a new approach of social sciences. Jordan (2009: 189) states that for anthropology and ethnography, this means that we need to adopt our methods of data collection, analysis, and representation to changing conditions as our investigations move into hybrid territories.

Communication studies are also another significant area affected from digital revolution. Virtual worlds let people stay anonymous and share their opinions regardless of physical distance. Reduced involvement obligation is also another factor why communicating online is a different context than communicating face to face (McDevitt, 2003).

Panayirci' s (2008) review of computer mediated communication's (CMC) effect on communication theories reveals that despite prominent differences, the essence of communication –computer mediated or not- remains same. Virtual social life let people enjoy diversity of opinions expressed. People state that computer mediated communication does not get boring since there are many different points of view. Another remarkable finding is the attitude of moderation during CMC. The notion of moderation is referring to the moderation in the perceptions of individuals during opinion expression (Panayırcı, 2008). Ho and McLeod (2008) summarize the concept as:

"The identical viewpoint may be perceived by others as more moderate in the CMC context than in the face-to-face context."

Another important variable in CMC is time. Duration of communication plays a vital role in normalizing behaviours during virtual social life. With time behavior norms of real social life are carried to virtual social life. Possibility of sustaining actual group interaction over time as well as developing normative expectations for "proper" social behavior may be proposed as reasons for this development.

5. CONCLUSION

We are living in an ever changing world. What remained same in this ever changing context is the need of individuals to be social. In our reality where real and the virtual increasingly unite, virtual social life occupies an important place for individuals. Just like individuals, new technologies need to have a social life too. They need to be accepted by masses in order to be successful.

This study tried to review and reveal studies concentrated on aspects of virtual social life. Marketing possibilities and social impacts are emerged as arguably two most important sides of virtual social life.

Virtual social contexts may become vital to democratize the society we are living in. Therefore, future studies concentrating on virtual social life are extensively needed.

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