

# 3

## From Good Associates to True Friends: An Exploration of Friendship Practices in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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### 3.1 Introduction

Early text-based multiuser dungeons (MUDs) required users to read through descriptions of physical environments and type in commands in order to perform in-game actions. Player-to-player interaction was limited to text-based communication and chat room encounters. Online gaming has since come a long way. Most massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) now support a variety of communication modes, including voice chat and in-game messaging (Park et al., 2006; Williams, Xiong, & Caplan, 2007). MMOs are places of social gathering that bring players together in persistent, fictional worlds where social interaction is a key activity (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Williams et al., 2007; Yee, 2006). Crawford, Gosling, and Light (2011) argue that such collective engagement makes MMOs appealing and encourages players to develop long-term gaming commitments: “For many players of [MMOs], the key reason they play these (and continue to do so over a long period) is not necessarily the attainment of particular goals, but rather socializing and keeping in touch with fellow players” (p. 9). The opportunity to interact with other users has also been shown to increase players’ overall enjoyment of online games because playing with others makes the virtual world feel real and unpredictable (Christou et al., 2013).

While studies on social interaction in MMOs abound, there is little diversity in the games studied, with research overwhelmingly focusing on the popular massively multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (WoW). Some have expressed concern that building a generalized theory of online games from a small number of titles could be misleading since the experiences of WoW players are not necessarily representative of those who play other MMOs (Taylor, 2008). To help remediate this oversight, the MMO *EVE Online* was chosen as the research site for the study discussed in this

chapter. Qualitative interviews were conducted to learn how *EVE* players socialize with each other and how they make sense of the different social connections they have formed through the game.

### 3.2 *EVE Online* and Backchannel Communication

*EVE Online* (*EVE*) is a space-themed MMO with roughly 500,000 subscribers. Over the years, it has acquired a reputation as a rather ruthless game. Antagonistic activities such as grieving<sup>1</sup> and scamming<sup>2</sup> are not only commonplace, but also tolerated by the game's developer, CCP Games. *EVE*'s dog-eat-dog ethos is accompanied by a steep learning curve that forces players who want to succeed in-game to seek outside information on third party websites, forums, and other applications (Bergstrom, 2013; Bergstrom et al., 2013; Paul, 2011). Despite its entry barriers and hostile gameworld, the game has had a strong following since its release in 2003. *EVE*'s success has been attributed to its sandbox gameplay and emphasis on player-driven initiatives (Graft, 2012). Sandbox games offer open-ended gaming experiences in that players do not follow predefined missions or goals but set up their own activities based on what is available in the game. In *EVE*, players fly spaceships, control the game's economy, explore star systems, and fight over territories, among other pursuits. Although the game has built-in communication systems, such as text-based chat channels and email accounts, most *EVE* players choose to sidestep these official communication channels and instead interact with each other through Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIPs), Instant Messaging (IM), wikis, and forums that exist outside of the game client (Bergstrom et al., 2013).

These out-of-game spaces of interaction together form what is commonly referred to as a backchannel. While intimidating to newcomers, these communication tools facilitate "play outside of the game client" and make up a central component of the gaming experience in *EVE* (Bergstrom et al., 2013, p. 5). The practice of circumventing an official channel to engage in communication is not unique to MMOs. Backchannels are commonly used to facilitate informal or clandestine negotiations in a variety of situations, ranging from personal to diplomatic and political contexts. In MMOs, backchannel communication typically spans multiple media platforms. The resulting multilayered structure of engagement "takes the social aspects of the game one step further, creating a community that not only lives in-game, but also has significant substance

<sup>1</sup> Purposely harassing and irritating other players.

<sup>2</sup> Fraudulent in-game market transactions.

outside of it” (Christou et al., 2013, p. 727). In MMOs backchannels are important because they have the potential to enhance players’ gaming experience and increase their sense of connectedness both inside and outside of the gameworld (Williams et al., 2007).

Past studies have acknowledged the significance of in-game and out-of-game communication in facilitating social interaction and enhancing players’ social lives (Williams et al., 2007; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). The contents of backchannel communication and the everyday experiences of multisited engagement, however, remain underexplored. This chapter examines the types of social interactions that take place on the backchannel of *EVE Online* and how players make sense of the different relationships they have developed with their fellow users. Special attention is given to what *EVE* players talk about and do while on the backchannel and how these interactions impact their lives both inside and outside of the game. This chapter highlights how MMOs function as important spaces of social interaction where a wide range of relationships are formed. Findings suggest that backchannel communication not only allows players to organize more efficiently as an organization, but also that the backchannel is an important space for casual conversations, a gathering spot during moments of downtime and a place where players engage in informational as well as emotional exchanges. Analysis of qualitative interviews with *EVE* players suggests that like offline social relations, friendships that grow out of social interaction in MMOs exist on a continuum of commitment and intimacy and are continually negotiated and reclassified as the relationship changes over time.

### 3.3 Literature Review

#### 3.3.1 Social Interaction in Online Games

MMOs range widely in type and content, from role-playing games to first-person shooters, but they share one common trait: they emphasize player interaction and bring together large numbers of players from across the world. This means that a high percentage of users players encounter online are people whom they have never met face to face (Nardi & Harris, 2006). Players, however, do not remain strangers for long and social interaction in MMOs has been linked to positive outcomes such as improved personal well-being and greater social capital (Skoric & Kwan, 2011; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Studies suggest that between 56% and 60% of players make friends online whom they then proceed to meet offline (Domahidi, Festl, & Quandt,

2014; Schiano et al., 2014). The opportunity to strike up new friendships that translate into offline social relations has important implications for players' personal networks and their access to social capital resources.

Social capital is often conceptualized as the social, political, and economic resources an individual can access through his or her social relations (Appel et al., 2014; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). There are two dimensions of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. The former refers to the resources accessible from intimate relations (strong ties) such as family and close friends. The latter refers to resources accessible from less intimate, but more diverse contacts (weak ties) such as coworkers, neighbors, and people from volunteer groups and other social settings (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). Social capital is considered a valuable resource because it is associated with a wide range of social, political, informational, and emotional benefits. The interactive component of MMOs invites players to engage with each other, develop new friendships, and in the process creates opportunities for players to activate social capital resources with benefits that extend offline. A one-month panel study of online gamers found that after experiencing the sense of belonging that comes with being a member of a large online community, players reported attending in-person club meetings more frequently than before they started playing the game (Williams, 2006). This suggests that online interactions can have a positive impact on people's offline social lives.

Because MMOs provide a space to socialize outside of the traditional social environments of the workplace and home, researchers have argued that they function as a "third place" for informal sociability (Oldenburg, 1989; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Backchannels and in-game communication systems allow players to coordinate game-related activities, but interaction is not limited to task-oriented conversation. Analyses of text-based exchanges in the online game *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, for example, revealed that players produce three times more socioemotional communication than task-oriented communication and that a majority of these socioemotional messages are positive in nature, such as jokes, declarations of solidarity, and other expressions of tension release (Peña & Hancock, 2006). In other words, MMOs can act as welcoming and comfortable spaces for casual conversations.

### 3.3.2 Guilds, Clans, and Other Player Organizations

Past studies on social interaction in MMOs have established that online gaming is a highly social activity in which users develop a sense of responsibility and commitment toward their fellow players (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Yee, 2006). These experiences are not a byproduct of the game, but

carefully planned. MMOs are intentionally designed for sociability, with built-in features that encourage or even force players to engage with each other (Christou et al., 2013; Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2004). Common sociability designs include systems of mutual dependence between players that offer higher rewards for cooperative work. In the MMO *Star Wars Galaxies*, for example, the various character professions (medic, scout, marksman, etc.) were intentionally designed for codependence, thereby encouraging social contact between players (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). Other features likely to promote player interaction include group structures and well-defined enemies and goals that bind players through a shared in-game objective (Christou et al., 2013). Taylor (2009), in her examination of the online game *EverQuest*, found that certain in-game tasks and monster battles were more easily accomplished as a group, thus giving players an incentive to work as a team.

While MMOs offer players the possibility to interact with thousands of users, many players choose to play in smaller groups, commonly referred to as guilds or clans. These player organizations are central to the social experience of MMOs. They represent the place where one's important relationships are formed and where players spend the majority of their in-game time (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Compared to interactions in the game at large, guilds, clans, and other player organizations represent "more permanent associations" and are often formed around "like-minded players" who share similar social and game-related interests (Williams et al., 2007, p. 429).

As distinct organizations within the broader game universe, guilds operate as online communities (Baym, 2010). They provide players with important resources for the development of interpersonal relationships, including a shared sense of space, practice, and identity, as well as mutual support and common resources. Guild members nurture each other and relate as a community by sharing gaming experiences, coordinating group efforts, offering tips for in-game success, and talking about their lives outside of the game (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010; Lee et al., 2013).

When joining a guild, players acquire a group identity and affiliation that separates them from other groups in the game. Taylor (2009) explains that *EverQuest* players who belong to the same guild are bound by a heightened sense of group identity and exhibit trust in multiple ways, including risking their characters' lives for each other, distributing loot fairly, sharing accounts, and facing difficult situations together as a group. The sense of togetherness experienced in guilds transcends the game and impacts players' personal well-being offline. Reer and Krämer (2014) argue that players who participate in the management of a guild and attend guild-related events offline are more willing to engage in self-disclosure and have higher chances of gathering

social capital resources than those who are not involved in player-driven organizations.

Although guilds share many commonalities, each group is a distinct entity and player organizations vary greatly in size and type. Some guilds consist of small groups of friends who play together casually. Other guilds have upwards of a hundred members and follow a hierarchical command-and-control structure organized around various leadership roles (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). One can also find groups that were created to accommodate particular player needs such as odd work schedules and disabilities (Poisso, 2013). Lastly, it is common for guilds to be established around different in-game goals and playing preferences such as socializing, raiding, role-playing, or PvP<sup>3</sup> (Warmelink & Siitonen, 2013; Williams et al., 2006).

The shared responsibility that comes out of operating as a group invites users to play with the goals of the entire guild in mind and to consider the needs of the group before their own (Taylor, 2009). Trust and reputation systems are especially important at the guild level and “compared to the loose community of the MMOG as a whole, guilds provide more of the trust-building features of social institutions (interdependence, persistence of identity, and strength of reputation system)” and are therefore more likely to enable the development of meaningful relationships than the general setting of MMOs (Ratan et al., 2010, p. 96). Though research on social interaction in MMOs has found support primarily for the existence of bridging capital, some stipulate that players who stay with their guild for longer periods of time are more likely to experience bonding capital and develop close ties than those who miss out on this communal experience (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Bonding capital requires frequent emotional as well as instrumental resource exchange and is more likely to be found among closely tied guild members than the general acquaintances players make when playing MMOs.

### 3.3.3 Social Interaction in *EVE*'s Corporations

To gain a deeper understanding of social interaction at the group level and to highlight under what circumstances players develop strong ties with fellow users, this chapter examines backchannel communication and friendship in the MMO *EVE Online*. *EVE*'s corporations can be compared to the guilds or clans commonly found in other MMOs. When players first start *EVE*, they are placed in a default nonplayer character (NPC) corporation.<sup>4</sup> Most players stay in this

<sup>3</sup> Player(s) versus player(s). Style of play focused on interactive conflict or combat against other players.

<sup>4</sup> NPC corporations are automated by the game and not organized by human players.

placeholder corporation while they complete the tutorials and familiarize themselves with the game's user interface. Once acclimated, players generally leave the NPC corporation in favor of a player-run corporation. These groups are long-term, formal associations of players overseen by a chief executive officer (CEO). Although only a CEO is required to set up a corporation, for management purposes, most corporations in *EVE* have several officers who control specific functionalities such as accounting, security, recruitment, and production management. In-game officers and regular corporation members rely on their group's backchannel for communication.

This chapter takes a close look at player communication on *EVE*'s many backchannels. Emphasis is placed on the types of activities that happen on the backchannel, the processes through which players strike up new friendships, and the maturation of online connections into off-game relations. By choosing to focus on *EVE*, this study also examines whether findings from past studies on social interaction in MMOs hold true for a game with a very different user base, theme, and in-game content than the popular *WoW*.

Friendship is a complex concept as the term "friend" is used by different people to mean different things. Simply saying that players have made friends online through a game doesn't reveal much about the value individuals attach to these relationships or how they integrate these connections into their daily lives. By examining how *EVE Online* players make sense of the range of relationships they have developed with their corporation members, including how they refer to their various online connections, this chapter makes important contributions to research on online social interaction and online friendship practices. The following two research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do players make sense of the various relationships they form with their fellow corporation members?

RQ2: What types of activities are facilitated by backchannel communication at the corporation level?

## 3.4 Methods

### 3.4.1 Data Collection

Qualitative interviews were conducted with current *EVE Online* players in March 2014. Participants were recruited through an advertisement posted on the popular entertainment site Reddit in a subreddit<sup>5</sup> dedicated to issues related

<sup>5</sup> A specific forum or subcategory of the general Reddit website.

to *EVE*. Though only registered Reddit users can post on r/Eve, the information published on the site is available to the general public. Anyone visiting r/Eve was able to see the recruitment notice. To be eligible for participation, players had to be at least 18 years of age and currently subscribed to *EVE Online*. The r/Eve recruitment post resulted in thirty-seven interested volunteers, of which fourteen individuals were purposefully selected for participation in a one-hour Skype voice interview. A purposive sample was chosen to recruit participants across a variety of criteria, including *EVE* gaming experience, preferred type of gameplay (PvP or PvE), and in-game corporation size. This approach was used to increase the diversity of players interviewed and capture a wider range of player experiences.

Interviews were semistructured to create a conversational tone and allow for follow-up questions. Interviewees were prompted to think about their relationship to their fellow corporation members, to discuss signs that a group of players has achieved a high level of trust, to talk about the kinds of activities they engage in on the backchannel, and to reflect on their experience joining a player-run corporation. Participants were compensated for their time with an *EVE* Time Code that could be redeemed for a one-month subscription to the game or in game currency and is worth the equivalent of \$14.95.

### 3.4.2 Sample

The sample included thirteen men and one woman. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years ( $M = 24$ ). Since only about 5% of *EVE* players are female the sample is in line with the general gender distribution of the game (Bergstrom, 2013). Participants' *EVE* gaming experience ranged from 3 months to 8 years ( $M = 32$  months). Efforts were made to accommodate volunteers from different time zones and the sample included participants from five different countries: United States, United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Netherlands, and Canada. The sample also included members from different size corporations. Some participants reported being part of very small corporations that counted only a handful of members; others belonged to medium-sized corporations of close to a hundred players; and a few were part of some of the game's largest corporations with upwards of 3,000 members. No exact membership numbers were recorded.

### 3.4.3 Data Analysis

Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed by the interviewer. An open coding approach was used to analyze the content of the interviews.



Part of grounded theory, open coding invites researchers to analyze data line-by-line and explore the various theoretical possibilities that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Participants' answers to the interview questions were carefully compared and contrasted in an attempt to discern common themes and develop potential activity and friendship categories. In the first step of the analysis, all the interview sections dealing with backchannel communication among corporation members and online friendship were sorted and separated for closer review. In the second step, these particular passages were again analyzed line-by-line and then reorganized and classified based on the types of activities players described and how they characterized their relationship to their fellow corporation members.

### 3.5 Analysis and Discussion

#### 3.5.1 Task-Related Communication and in-Game Associates

The first type of player relationship that emerged from the open coding analysis is that of in-game associates (RQ1). Players who indicated primarily having good associates or in-game acquaintances engaged mostly in task-oriented activities focused around achieving common game goals (RQ2). They typically used the backchannel to organize as a group and discuss *EVE*-related information. Popular communication tools included the IM service Jabber, Mumble and TeamSpeak VoIPs, and corporation or alliance<sup>6</sup> specific internet forums. In particular, participants who were part of large corporations reported having comprehensive backchannel setups to accommodate multiple discussion groups:

The corporation I'm in is actually quite big, upwards of 3000 members . . . We have an out-of-game forum, a messaging server, and a VoIP server that are used out-of-game. That's where most of the communication, coordination, and general discussion between corporation and alliance members usually goes on . . . There are smaller groups within the alliance or corporation, special interest groups, groups that focus on a specific type of thing, and social groups.

In large corporations where membership reaches thousands of players, it is not possible to know every player. Corporation leaders are aware of this limitation and this is why many corporations have special interest groups for players to make connections with members who share their social interests or in-game goals. Having multiple chat channels also allows corporations to synchronously

<sup>6</sup> In *EVE* corporations can ban together to form alliances against other groups.

run multiple operations (ops) such as fleet deployments, small-group roams, and wormhole explorations. This type of out-of-game communication structure is not unique to *EVE* and can be found in other games as well (Christou et al., 2013).

Off-game communication tools are very popular among player groups because they are highly versatile and allow users to tailor the application's features to the needs of the organization. IM services such as Jabber, for example, can be linked to portable devices. A participant noted that his corporation asks members to install the application on their mobile phones so that they can easily be notified of in-game activities:

Typically I'll just receive a ping on my cell phone that's an alliance wide ping that goes out via the Jabber protocol. It details what's going on and what specific activity is happening at that time. So I can just log in and I know what's gonna happen and mostly I log on because of these pings. Mostly it's PvP oriented, so we form a group and go fight some other people, take a station, take a system, or defend a system.

Jabber is a powerful organizational tool because it allows corporations to quickly mobilize forces via a system-wide notification. Although it is efficient, this practice is not very personal. Some players like this task-oriented approach to playing *EVE*. Several interviewees stated they log on to the backchannel primarily for game-related purposes and not necessarily to socialize. When discussing their relationships with their fellow corporation members, users who played the game primarily to participate in space battles and other group ops did not refer to corporation members as friends, but said things like "they're good associates" or "I'd probably go with acquaintances." Their relationships with these other players are highly dependent on the shared practice of playing *EVE* as part of the same corporation. If they did not participate in ops together, these individuals would likely not interact. Consequently, one interviewee pointed out that he did not make any true friends in the game:

I have not really forged any relationships within my corporation . . . I don't really have any friends or just people I really know. I know some by name and I think probably some know me, but not as a person, just my character I'd say, just what I can do, the roles that I can fulfill, but not on a personal level or anything.

Although this interviewee indicates that he enjoys playing *EVE*, his interactions with other players are limited to participating in corporation ops. He points out that others in the game know his abilities and what he can contribute to the corporation, but that they don't know his name or who he is personally. Associate-level friendships among corporation members are more task-based than emotional. Players' motivations for interacting with each other are highly

dependent on the fact that they belong to the same organization and share similar in-game goals. In that respect, in-game associates can be conceived of as a type of given friend or default contact. These connections are also known as Aristotelian friendships of utility because interaction is motivated by the desire to accomplish common interests or tasks rather than mutual affinity (Aristotle, 2011; Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

### 3.5.2 Casual Interactions and Social Friends

The second type of player relationship is that of social friends (RQ1). Within their corporation, interviewees reported associating more closely with five to fifteen other players. They consider these players friends and socialize with them during the game and when they are on their computers throughout the day. For this smaller group, the backchannel represents an important gathering place. This is where players come not only to hear about ongoing corporation ops and the latest *EVE* activities, but to engage in small talk about videogames, popular culture, and the news, among other topics (RQ2):

In the Jabber client we just tend to talk about anything, it doesn't necessarily have to be *EVE* related . . . We'll post something that may be humorous, there's a subreddit called Dirty Jokes and we'll just link to that, and then random YouTube videos of songs and things like that.

It really depends on the group, but if we're just sitting around and talking on Mumble, it will usually just be about anything or everything. Sometimes I'll be doing something on my computer and I'll idle the Mumble channel and if somebody is talking about something interesting, I'll join in the conversation . . . We've had talks about real life politics, to fittings in the game itself, to even religion sometimes too.

While *EVE* is known for its majestic, large-scale space battles, there are many moments when not much is happening in the game. As a sandbox, *EVE* depends on players to generate game content and storylines, and sometimes days or even weeks go by before any major events happen. Individuals who play *EVE* primarily for the game don't log onto the backchannel during downtime. For those who enjoy the social aspect of MMOs, however, the backchannel becomes a highly interesting and entertaining place when in-game action subsides. These moments give players the opportunity to extend the relationships they developed in *EVE* outside of the game:

I know a big chunk of these people. Between Jabber and the forums and fleets you get to meet a lot of different people every day . . . It's not a crazy intimate relationship, but we get together and we play other games not just *EVE*. I have a group where we play Dungeons and Dragons together through d20 which is a lot of

fun. There's groups where we go play League of Legends together so I mean the friendships that I've made extend outside of the game which is fun . . . *EVE* can get boring, it can get grindy. It's a long game, it's a long grind. You're in it for the long run so it's nice to bring those friendships outside of the game.

I've actually made quite a few friends in my player corporation and I do speak to them on the regular and I do play other games with them as well on top of that . . . There are about 5 or 6 people that I quite happily talk to. I'll have Skype calls with them and we'll play other games such as Dota and stuff like that . . . I tend to leave [Jabber] logged on pretty much every time I'm at the computer.

As players get to know each other on a more personal level, backchannel communication increases and they connect with each other not only through the off-game communication platforms provided by the corporation (IM, VoIP, and forums), but also through more personal modes of communication such as Skype and sites dedicated to virtual tabletop games.

Participants who had made social friends reported engaging in self-disclosure and knew personal details about this smaller circle of corporation members, such as birthdays, marital status, occupation, and place of living. These types of relationships are less dependent on *EVE* than task-oriented associations, but they still depend on a shared interest in videogames and popular culture more broadly. Although there is some self-disclosure in social friendships, the amount and type of information users are willing to share with their corporation members vary. One interviewee explained that he is consciously limiting what type of personal information he brings up on the backchannel:

I wouldn't talk to them about anything that was going on in the real world, or maybe I would, but it would be very broad, not very specific. So for example, at the moment me and my wife are going through the process of buying a house, they know that I'm buying a house, but they don't know where it is or how much it is or when we're moving . . . I want to keep [*EVE*] separate from everything else that's going on.

Although he considers several of his corporation members friends the fact that he does not want to share specific details about his personal life indicates that these relationships do not have the level of intimacy and reciprocity associated with close ties. Furthermore, his point that he likes to keep *EVE* separated from other things that are happening in his life speaks to the desire to maintain a certain distance between his online activities and his personal self. Although social friendships are more intimate than task-oriented associations, these relationships are still tied together mainly by a shared passion for videogames and some general small talk. Sharing details about one's personal life may seem outside of the scope of this type of relationship.

The social friendships described by *EVE* participants are in line with the socioemotional behaviors observed in previous studies (Peña & Hancock, 2006). *EVE*'s status as a sandbox, however, and especially its frequent moments of downtime, mean that *EVE* offers more opportunities for social interaction outside of the game than other MMOs. Indeed, interviewees indicated talking on the backchannel not only when they were actively playing the game, but also at other times throughout the day. In many ways, the backchannel of their *EVE* corporation became a hangout. They would log on to Jabber and other sites to check in on their fellow corporation members, engage in small talk, and even play other games together. In his discussion about adult friendships in the workplace, Rawlins (1992) notes that social ties are "personal ties transcending the work setting and involving some talking as well as doing things together" (p. 191). In other words, social friends engage in a few select activities and share some personal details, but lack the level of intimacy that one would find between close friends.

### 3.5.3 Beyond *EVE*: Forging True Friendships Online

The third category of player relationship that emerged from the interviews was that of true friends (RQ1). For corporation members who are social friends, backchannel communication binds them together during gameplay as well as during downtime. For an even smaller circle of these friends, playing *EVE* and joining a player corporation led to the development of close ties and what interviewees called "true friends." Those relationships are no longer predicated on playing *EVE* together, but on interacting across a wide range of sites, both online and offline. The relationship between true friends is different from that between social friends in that it has reached a level of camaraderie beyond casual conversation and gaming-related activities. True friends still use the corporation's backchannel as a place of social gathering, but also interact with each other on social network sites (Facebook), Skype, Steam, telephone, and email (RQ2). These other sites are not tied to the corporation's backchannel, but represent personal efforts on the part of players to connect with people they met in the game in other online venues. For true friends, social interaction on the corporation's backchannel is only one of many modes of communication. These friends engage in social activities such as watching a movie or video chatting on Skype, but personal information sharing and intimacy are much higher for true friends than for social friends:

There's a solid maybe 10 people that have been in [the corporation] about the same amount of time that I have, those people we have each other's cell phone numbers,

we have each other's personal email addresses, Facebook, Twitter, the whole nine yards. And that's just because we want to know and be able to communicate with each other outside and inside the game. That's the camaraderie that I've grown to enjoy and take part in on a daily basis.

So there's some of them, where I have them on Skype and we have each other on Facebook. So there's a select few of them that I feel like if the game were to fall apart or the community were to fall apart, we'd still manage to be friends outside of it.

True friends exhibit greater levels of trust and emotional support than social friends. Interviewees generally had only a few friends whom they met through *EVE* and who would fall under the classification of true friends. These friendships were typically built over several years of online interaction and interviewees were confident these friendships would continue to thrive even if the gaming community where their friendship originated were to fall apart. In addition to sharing online contact information, interviewees who expressed having made true friends in the game knew each other's real names and were in touch outside of *EVE* and the backchannel. Adding someone on social media and exchanging phone numbers and email addresses are all actions that bind individuals at a more personal level than casual social interaction on the backchannel. Motivation for sharing resources and information is high among true friends. Although some interviewees had not yet met the true friends they made through *EVE* in person, they felt they could rely on these individuals for help in times of need:

A handful of them I can describe as being true friends, people I know in real life and people that could call me on my phone and ask me a favor and I'd be more than happy to help . . . If I found myself through their town and needing a couch to crash on, I would feel comfortable calling them.

The people I used to play *World of Warcraft* with, I don't speak to them anymore. I don't play *EVE* a whole lot anymore and I still talk to those people from *EVE Online* every day . . . In that regard the community is much better . . . There's lots of different avenues for me to get in touch with people and we are all always very excited to talk to each other . . . A lot of the good friends that I do have are through *EVE* so I feel they know more about me than other people might share . . . I'm definitely along the lines of if something goes wrong in my life they are the first people I contact.

The availability of emotional support in addition to information exchange separates true friends from social friends. That some corporation members engage in personal socioemotional sharing is particularly interesting given that the majority of players (95%) in *EVE* are male (Bergstrom, 2013). Men are known for being less willing to engage in emotional and personal sharing and Rawlins (1992) states that "men limit their vulnerability by revealing

less about themselves to their friends, avoiding the discussion of feelings or personal issues and focusing more on activities and objective issues such as sports and politics” (p. 110). While interviewees reported mostly having social friends with whom they interact casually, a handful of participants stated that they share information about their romantic relationships and other more intimate real-life details with members of their corporation to whom they feel close. This indicates that, for some men at least, MMOs are a safe place for the discussion of personal information. Further research is needed in order to explore in more depth the extent of disclosure between males in MMOs, as this study only provides initial, exploratory insights into this topic. Initial findings from this study, however, are optimistic and suggest that as long-term player organizations, *EVE*'s corporations allow players to develop a range of social relationships, including close ties.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines the types of activities players engage in on the backchannel and the various degrees of friendship that exist in *EVE*. It contributes to current research on social interaction in MMOs and shows that under the right conditions, players can develop lasting friendships through online games. Findings reveal three main types of player relationships: in-game associates, social friends, and true friends. Each category of friendship is associated with different types of backchannel activities. In-game associates engage mostly in task-oriented activities that involve accomplishing shared goals. Social friends interact with each other in the game, but also make time for casual conversations and visit their corporation's backchannel even in moments of low in-game activity. In the case of true friendship, in addition to socializing, players also engage in personal and emotional exchanges. Their interaction extends outside of the corporation's backchannel to media such as email, phone, and social media.

As with most qualitative work the goal of this research is not generalizability, but to advance the current understanding on online friendships. Drawing on semistructured interviews, this chapter explores the potential of the MMO *EVE Online* to encourage the development of both bridging and bonding capital. The *EVE* players interviewed for this study developed in-game associations and social friendships with the members of their corporation and regularly engaged in casual interactions on backchannel. These findings are consistent with previous findings about the potential of guilds and player-driven groups to foster a sense of togetherness among players. Most interestingly, though, the finding that some corporation members established true friendships that

are not dependent on *EVE* shows that MMOs do indeed have the ability to foster strong ties. Previous studies speculated that because MMOs commonly focus on task-based interactions and informal sociability they may lack the deeper emotional connections needed for the formation of bonding capital (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). *EVE*'s emphasis on sandbox interaction and its frequent moments of downtime, however, make it stand out among other MMOs in that it gives players more opportunities for backchannel socialization that extends outside of the game. This chapter highlights the crucial role played by backchannel communication and social systems in the friendship process. Although many *EVE* players are physically separated from each other, often by large geographical distances, they are not isolated socially. *EVE*'s player organizations and the various interest groups within corporations offer players a sense of shared identity and community belonging. Having friendships of different degrees of intimacy is an important aspect of one's personal well-being. By offering players the opportunity to establish task-oriented relationships, social friendships, and in some instances true friendships, MMOs help players fulfill utilitarian and hedonic needs.

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