The Playground is Alive: Online Games and the Formation of a Virtual Subculture

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Online games have gained significant following from Filipino gamers. In this study, the researchers argue that the involvement of the gamers have led to the formation of a virtual subculture, which is composed mainly of the youth. To frame this study, three communication theories were used to explain the online gaming phenomenon. Three qualitative methods were used to gather necessary data: a key-informant interview with a local game developer, focus group discussions with gamers, and participant observation wherein the researchers played with other gamers while observing the online environment. From the data gathered, the researchers were able to find out how gamers define, form and recreate the virtual subculture, as well as how their online identities and the ideas they share help maintain, sustain, develop and expand the said subculture. As this research aims to provide a holistic approach to online gaming, suggested areas for future research and some practical recommendations are also discussed.

The year 2003 was a turning point for the gaming industry in the Philippines with the introduction of *Ragnarok Online*, the first online game that is customizable for Filipinos. Since then, many online games have been developed, attracting many "passionate" gamers in the process. Not only are these games free, they also enable their users to customize their online characters and surroundings as well as to communicate with other players.

Today, online gamers in the Philippines number around 4.9 million (hackenslash.net, n.d.). Thanks to the proliferation of the Internet and the technological advancement in gaming, online games now emerge as the new mass medium for Filipino gamers. As such, it is a medium that requires the attention of communication researchers.

Since most studies on online gaming have been conducted from a Western perspective, there is a dearth of research about it from an Asian viewpoint. In addition, some of these studies were limited to specific aspects of the gaming realm—such as how gamers customize their avatars, or the representations of their online characters, and act inside the virtual world (Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002; Okorafor & Davenport, 2002 in Consalvo & Dutton, 2006)—rather than on the complete experience of gaming itself.

This study sought to address these research gaps by providing a holistic description of the formation and re-formation of a virtual subculture as gamers actively played inside the online world, using the Filipino gaming community as its specific context. Accordingly, this study focused on the subculture's characteristics and its effects on the gamers themselves.

Review of Related Literature

The term "virtual subculture", as used by the researchers in this study, refers to the collection of cultural elements that can be found in online games. These elements include language, systems of relationships, and identities.

A virtual subculture may be said to exist in a virtual community, a social subgroup "which emerge(s) from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993: 5). The cyberspace here is represented by the Internet, which has its

own culture (Hine, 2000) that continues to develop in the course of time. It is important to emphasize that in this study, the researchers see that the Internet has its own virtual culture maintained by one big virtual community, and the Internet's several 'parts'–which include chat sites, e-groups, and online gaming sites – have their own smaller virtual communities forming and maintaining their respective virtual subcultures.

Among the sites on the Worldwide Web, online games, which refer to "sites on the Internet where computer users (the gamers) come together to exchange information, do business, seek amusing adventures, build cities, hunt monsters, or even make war and kill one another" (Jennings, 2006: 60), serve as the medium used by gamers to form and re-form a virtual subculture. Online gaming sites are good examples of multi-user domains, where the participants develop and use a shared language, as well as ways of expressing themselves well with others. These help establish a common subculture that is distinct from the more dominant Internet culture (Hine, 2000).

Online gamers primarily comprise the youth, who, in turn, have their own subcultures. The youth subculture–and perhaps the virtual subculture, in a sense–is formed partly due to the youth's penchant to seek pleasure, fun, and leisure (Willis, 1990), as well as to find and construct their own identity. Hendry et al. (1993) agreed that through leisure, young people truly realize and eventually define themselves. The realm of leisure also enables the youth to forge peer groups that facilitate open-type relationships and pass on latest trends and fashions. This aids young people in developing their own personality and further expanding their social horizons.

In the Philippine setting, Khan (2006) said that gaming is now more accessible compared to the 1990s where only people who could afford to buy gaming consoles like the *Family Computer* and *Atari* could play games such as *Super Mario* and *Pac-Man*. She said that online games help children and teens get familiarized with computers, pushing them to dream of

becoming information technology professionals in the future. This helps boost the Internet café industry, as indicated by the mushrooming of Internet shops and similar establishments within and beyond the National Capital Region.

In a study conducted in December 2004 by Netopia, the largest Internet café chain in the Philippines (Khan, 2006), it was found that online gamers spent an average of P60 and at least two hours per day playing in Internet cafés. During gametime, most gamers were logged on to computers playing Korean-made online games, led by *Ragnarok Online,* a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Developed by Gravity Co., Ltd., Ragnarok started the wave of online gaming in the country. Khan (2006) attributed the success of the game to its customization for the Filipino audience. Gamers could communicate with others using the vernacular language, and some characters and aspects of the game are named after or are associated with Filipinos.

Similar online games that were introduced after Ragnarok encouraged Filipino game developers to start their own computer-based games, although not yet enabled for online use. One such game is *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged,* developed by Anino Entertainment, Inc. in 2004.

The rise of the Internet has enabled the introduction and evolution of online games to become a new venue for mass communication. The sense-stimulating environment created by the online gaming world tends to lure the young to remain inside the realm. And through the gamers' continued usage of the medium as their venue for entertainment and communication, a virtual subculture is formed that creates its own identity and helps the gamers to discover and create their own online identity.

Problem and Objectives

This research seeks to answer the general question of how online games serve their purpose as the medium used by the interacting

gamers in the online realm to form and recreate a virtual subculture.

The online gamers are referred to as the sources of the different messages diffused inside the virtual subculture. Their messages come in the form of words, the strategies and practices they use in playing, and the ideas conveyed by the avatars or online characters they use. These are transmitted using the online games as the channel or medium. The audiences are the other online gamers who either accept or counter them with messages. The virtual subculture refers to the subculture inside the world of online games, regardless of the online game played by the gamers involved.

More specifically, this study posed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do gamers define and characterize 'virtual subculture' in online gaming?

RQ2: How do they form, recreate, maintain, and expand the virtual subculture?

RQ3: How do they construct their online identities?

RQ4: How do they share their ideas and form relationships online?

Study Framework

Three related theories used in the field of communication helped the research team construct the framework that guided their analysis of the virtual subculture inside online games and the involvement of gamers in forming and recreating such a subculture.

The *symbolic convergence theory,* formulated by Ernest Bormann to explain small group communication phenomena, and the *symbolic interactionism theory,* developed by George Herbert Mead to explain interactions as the "building blocks" of society and culture (Littlejohn, 1997), were used together to
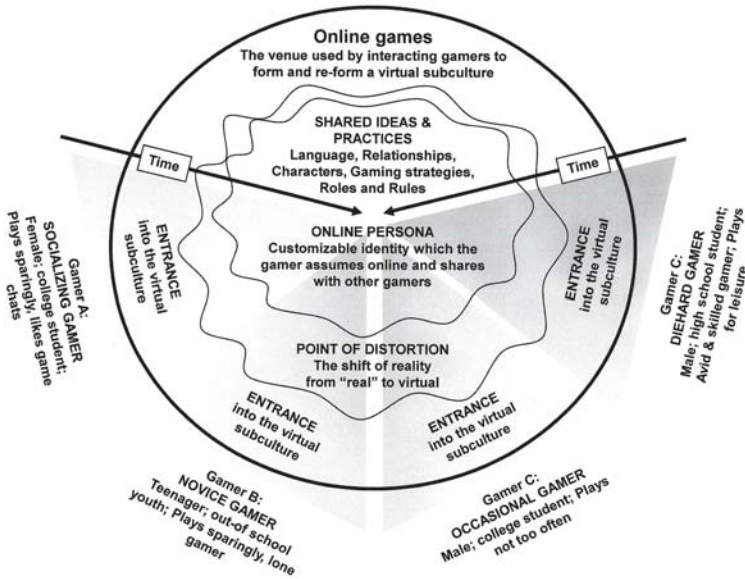
Figure 1. The Formation and Recreation of a Virtual Subculture
in Online Games through the Interaction of the Online Gamers

explain the entry of individual gamers into the virtual world. The model (see Figure 1) shows four types of online gamers, classified based on their length of time and experience with playing online games: 1) a *novice gamer* who is new to online gaming and seeks to learn more from his or her initial interactions with other gamers; 2) an *occasional gamer* who has little experience in online gaming and is still learning how to be "in" in the gaming realm; 3) a *socializing gamer* who has already obtained a lot of experiences in the game and seeks to meet and befriend newgamers online; and 4) a *diehard gamer* who may be said to be already an expert in playing online games, spends the most number of hours online, and is passionate in playing and interacting with other gamers. Each gamer has his or her own real identity–that is, his or her actual self in the real world.

The shaded triangle indicate the tangibility of the entry of online gamers into the virtual world through the use of computers with an Internet connection. While entering the virtual world, the gamers, consciously or not, go through a point of distortion of reality (signified by the wavy circle) wherein they leave *"actual" reality* and enter *virtual reality*. Immediately upon entry, the gamers assume their online identities, or *personas,* which can be somewhat similar or totally different from their real identities. Following the arguments of symbolic interactionism theory, the online identities are formed by framing the *self* – that is, the sum total of the expectations and responses picked up from the people around (Griffin, 1997). The resulting self projected by the gamers, thus, is not the real self, but the "looking-glass self," or the "generalized other", the image of a gamer expected by the other gamers inside the gaming world.

The gamers' "selves" are modified slowly as they finally begin to adapt to the "way of life" or the subculture of any online game they are playing, be it *Ragnarok Online* or other similar games. The online gaming realm here is referred to as the "social space" (Littlejohn, 1997). Within it, norms, values, language, and relationships may change as the virtual interaction progresses.

Again, using the symbolic interactionism theory, it could be explained that as the novice, occasional, socializing, and diehard gamers begin to interact, they also begin to influence each other, creating *shared ideas*. The shared ideas come in the form of *language*, such as the uniquely Filipino term *"walang sawsaw"* [no dipping] used to warn gamers not to meddle with another gamer in killing an online monster; *game strategies,* as shown by teamwork among *parties* and *guilds* – small groups formed by gamers while playing; the *avatar,* or the online character portrayed and used by the gamers, such as a "knight", "archer", or a magician"; the *roles played* by the said character in the game, like being a "frontliner", "support", or a "healer"; and the *rules* used in playing online games, such as when to

start *party battles.* These ideas with meanings shared and understood by online gamers inside the subculture are called by Mead (cited in Littlejohn, 1997) as *significant symbols.*

These significant symbols are shared and understood by gamers depending on three important principles in the creation of the gamers' projected "selves" online: the *meaning* attached to the symbols shared within the subculture where the gamers depend their action upon; the *language,* or the means used by gamers to express ideas or symbols while interacting with other gamers - in the form of speech acts; and the *thought,* or mental conversations happening in the minds of gamers that are based on the different points of view they see from the identities of other gamers inside the subculture. As a situational example, one might consider the actions behind the concept of the term "*walang sawsaw",* used by a gamer to warn other gamers intruding in his or her business to kill a monster. A gamer sees a large monster that has an enormous power and is difficult to overcome. He or she then decides to try to kill the monster. The other gamers, seeing the event, may see different meanings in what is happening, depending on what type of gamer they are. A novice gamer might think that "I don't know how to kill that monster", and the resulting action, or language, is that he or she might just ignore what is happening. But a diehard gamer might see the event as a chance to prove his or her vast influence in the gaming subculture, and armed with confidence and skill, the resulting language is that he or she joins the gamer in killing the villain.

For the gamer attacking the monster, the interferer's action relates not only to the chance of killing the villain, but also to getting the rewards from doing so. Thus, to prevent prospective interferers from reaping the undue rewards of their meddling, gamers announce "walang sawsaw" in the chat box, a panel for verbal communication that is seen in the game's forum.

At this stage, Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory* comes in. While the theory is intended to explain communication phenomena in small groups, it may actually explain the maintenance and expansion of the virtual subculture in online gaming. The theory is based on the idea that "by sharing common fantasies, a collection of individuals is transformed into a cohesive group" (Griffin, 1997: 34). Fantasies refer to past or future events which are not related to what is going on within the group. In the case of online gaming, the theory may be used to explain, for example, the working dynamics within two gamers. A gamer seeking online friendship stops serious playing and instead approaches another gamer using his or her avatar. Then, the gamer may start chatting with the other gamer, and soon, appearing in the chat box are exchanges of talk regarding about the gamer's personal life – a fantasy – where the other gamer responds. The response is known as the *fantasy chain reaction,* which is commonly a positive and energetic response (Griffin, 1997). The fantasy chain reaction is of higher importance when symbolic convergence is seen at work in communication patterns within online *parties,* which will be elaborated further in the discussion part of this research.

The phenomenon of the introduction, exchange, and adoption of ideas within, and the resulting maintenance and expansion of, the virtual subculture, may be alternatively explained by a third theory, the *theory of diffusion of innovation,* developed by Everett Rogers and his colleagues. Littlejohn (2002) explained that diffusion of innovation occurs "when the adoption of an idea, practice, or object spreads by communication through a social system" (314). Innovation and diffusion are shown in the model as the ideas and practices of any of the online gamers in interacting with the other gamers.

Applying the diffusion process to the online gaming phenomenon, it may then be argued that the rate of adoption of ideas diffused within the virtual subculture depends on how

the online gamers accept or resist–both individually and as a community–the new language, strategy, or rule shared by any gamer. The diehard and socializing gamers, who base their thoughts on their long experience as gamers, may easily adopt any strategy used by other gamers if they see that it would be effective. As such, they "set the stage" (Littlejohn, 2002: 315) and influence other gamers, especially the occasional and novice gamers. Since these two types of gamers have not yet gained enough experience in the virtual realm, they do not know the 'ins' and 'outs' of surviving the world of online gaming. Thus, they still tend to observe how the more experienced gamers use a certain strategy to earn experience points and items before they adopt it finally as their own. Littlejohn (2002) noted that "As more and more people adopt [the new ideas introduced], a critical mass adoption occurs that gives rise to a rapid increase in general adoption [of the new idea]" (315). The new idea then becomes compatible with the virtual subculture. The new idea, thus, recreates, maintains, or sustains existing ideas in the subculture.

Methodology

Three qualitative methods were used to construct the needed data. A key informant focus interview was conducted with a local game developer to obtain information from the point of view of online game creators. The interviewee was Gabby Dizon, president and chief executive officer of FlipSide Games Studios, Inc., a private game design company, and currently the president of the Game Developers Association of the Philippines. Dizon was a member of the creative team behind *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged,* the first computer game developed by an all-Filipino team.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were then conducted in the towns of Baliuag, Bulacan, and Gen. Mariano Alvarez, Cavite, both situated outside the National Capital

Region. The participants, all within the 11-25 age bracket, were selected based on their length and breadth of experience in playing online games. They gave their views on how they used online games to create their online identities and help form and recreate the virtual subculture.

Lastly, participant observations were conducted to see how gamers actually used their online game accounts and immersed themselves into the online gaming world. Each of the four researchers had a counterpart persona for each of the four types of online gamers as classified in the study framework.

Findings and Discussion

Hinton (2006) explained that the developer of online games created three conditions to design an accessible gaming community. These conditions included:

- "Open standards that allowed anyone to create new maps and game modifications
- "An open language… that turned anybody with rudimentary C programming knowledge into an immediate game hacker
- "A function that – at no charge – allowed users' game servers to automatically update location and status at [the software developer's] central directory, so that any… player on the Internet could browse for a quick pickup game."

These characteristics of online games aided gamers in creating their online characters and encourage them to express their ideas through the communicative and gameplay strategies they use as they interact with other gamers (which helps gamers form online relationships). These ideas helped form, and later, create, maintain and sustain, develop and expand the virtual subculture inside the medium.

Definition and characteristics of 'virtual subculture'
in online gaming

The key informant, Gabby Dizon, said that he is also a gamer, playing as much as six hours a day. He said his gaming experience provides him with ideas in developing games. Further, it was also based on his gaming experience that he defined the term "virtual subculture" as a subculture formed through the interaction of online gamers – the way gamers react to each others' actions in the environment of online games. This emphasizes that the gamers are the key to the virtual subculture; the identities or online characters they use play a vital role in forming, and subsequently, recreating the subculture. It implies that the gamers, through their avatars, use the most important tool in forming and recreating the subculture– communication– which may vary from exchange of words such as chatting with other gamers, to visual communication as seen in the 'intense scene' of killing of villains or other characters online.

An FGD participant recalled a situation that supports this conclusion. He said that in attacking a monster, it is logical that gamers will do everything to kill it. However, other gamers would attempt to grab the rewards from killing the monster. In the process, they annoy the first gamer. As a result, this gamer uses the chatbox and types "walang sawsaw". This is a warning that tells them not to intervene in order to grab the prize after killing the monster. Gamers may also use emoticons through shortcut keys to make their avatars emote as though annoyed by the invading gamers. However, the reaction of the intervening gamers may differ depending on their personal objectives in doing such – whether to get the prize, to have fun killing the villain, or to merely annoy the gamer. In any case, the communication going on with the gamers through the avatars and the methods they use in expressing the ideas continue to recreate and develop the virtual subculture.

The FGD participants, on the other hand, admitted that they were unaware of the existence of the virtual subculture in online games. They were unconscious of its formation and development. Some of the FGD participants even said that they do not know what the term "virtual subculture" means, because it is quite a technical term. But when the researchers provided them with the working definition of the term, most of the participants said that the subculture entails playing with other gamers, looking for characters to kill and gamers to befriend. This shows that while the gamers could not define the "virtual subculture" as they would an ordinary dictionary term, the nature and the experience of playing online was their "definition" of the term. Thus, this indicates that the interaction and communication features of online games support the personal needs and wants of the youth gamers, which in the end, help form and expand the virtual subculture. This supports the view of Willis (1990) regarding the purpose of the young gamers when going online, which is tied up with identity searching and making, and seeking independence from the real world.

The researchers have also seen this during their participant observations. There was a consensus among them that while inside the virtual subculture, they felt that they have helped in its expansion and maintenance–by using the usual words communicated, or performing the assigned roles to their online characters–regardless of the span of time. However, one of them felt that he made a stronger impact when he stayed inside the gaming realm for a longer time. This suggests that time could also be a crucial factor in maintaining and expanding the virtual subculture.

As regards the characterization of the "virtual subculture" in online gaming, Dizon noted that while a virtual subculture could only be present on the Internet, it functions like a real-life subculture. Chatrooms, email exchange portals, and especially, online games, have their own subcultures that function very similarly to other subcultures in the real world,

like the subculture of mothers who have their own identities and ideas they share – such as how to deal with their adolescent children. A virtual subculture is formed by a community formed inside any Internet site that allows interaction of gamers while giving them leeway to use the identities they want. This leads to the realization that a virtual subculture is one that possesses both imaginary and real characteristics – similar to the existing subcultures in the real world, but different in the sense that imaginary, or even multiple, identities can be used.

The FGD discussants concurred with these ideas. Most of them remarked that while the virtual subculture looks different from a real-life subculture, they could talk in Filipino and look for Filipino friends from different parts of the country– to as far as Cebu and Butuan City, both cities in southern Philippines–and talk about their real-life customs, traditions and ways of living. One participant even said that as she has experienced, the usual introductory question of gamers to newfound friends was "ASL", or "age, sex and location," questions that Filipinos usually ask when meeting new people online. This implies that the virtual subculture allows players to use and display the influence and dominance of the real-life culture; in this case, the Philippine culture, but is only customized based on the individual likes of the gamers, relying mainly on their self-created identities.

The only difference in the virtual subculture, Dizon said, is that the gamers involved share an online space rather than a physical one. As such, there are no physical boundaries, in contrast to the actual world, where cultures are limited by geographical differences. In a virtual subculture, the social space is "freer", making it possible for the virtual subculture to develop and expand to an undetermined size. This means that more players could be accommodated and, consequently, more ideas could be communicated and shared, regardless of the gamers' experience in gaming or real-life background. Again, the FGD participants concurred with this view, and said that even gaps

in age and language are also blurred when gamers inside the virtual subculture interact with one another. In the actual world, in contrast, individuals tend to interact with people of the same age bracket (e.g., children, teens, adults), societal or hierarchical roles (e.g., children or parents, employees or executives), and linguistic background (e.g., English as the global language used, or Filipino as the Philippines' national language).

Formation, recreation, maintenance,
and expansion of a virtual subculture

Dizon said that gamers play an important role in forming, recreating, maintaining, and developing a virtual subculture. Gamers present their respective ideas and display their online characters in the virtual world. Other gamers would then react by giving a supportive, contradictory, or indifferent message. Dizon emphasized that as long as there are gamers (at least two) who play the games online, regardless of other people who had stopped playing after some time, the virtual subculture would continue to form, reform, maintain, sustain, and develop itself. Otherwise, the virtual subculture would eventually "die", or remain stagnant or inactive, without any development.

   "Death" is defined by one FGD participant, a socializing gamer, in terms of his feeling– specifically, of getting bored when he sees that all gamers had gone to "help" kill a monster and left him, or when nobody wants to talk with him. The same feeling of boredom was experienced by one of the researchers–a novice gamer–during the participant observations, because he had little knowledge of what to do while playing online. This implies that constant interaction is needed to form and expand the subculture. The interaction comes in two ways: "active", where the gamer does the initiative to interact with the other gamers, and "passive", where the gamers help foster a stimulating gaming atmosphere to the others by involving the former in gameplay or interacting with them.

Construction of online identities

Dizon stated that the "very free", if not extreme, kind of freedom is experienced inside the virtual subculture of online gaming because it allows gamers to create an alternate persona in a "safe setting." In the virtual subculture, gamers experience less interference from their fellow gamers. Perhaps this could be attributed to the anonymity of the gamers' "real" identity from the other gamers' senses – what is called as *tabula rasa,* or a "blank slate". One of the researchers fashioned his online character according to his personal taste. Most of the FGD participants used their real-life character with a few alterations. But one FGD participant used two online characters in playing online–one showing his real side, and the other, showing a "better" self.

Dizon, the FGD participants, and the researchers themselves had the same views about the process by which online identities are developed. All agreed that naming their avatars was the first step in creating an online identity. This was followed by selecting the role the character would play inside the gaming world, like job classes (e.g., acolyte, merchant, assassin) or hierarchical positions (e.g., guild master, guild member). Then the character itself was customized physically – that is, the clothing, weapons, accessories, and strength and skill attributes such as vitality, dexterity, and agility. Gamers could change their characters any way they want, without interference from other gamers. Lastly, the gamers could make their characters roam freely in the gaming realm and be part of the virtual subculture.

But while all sides agreed with the process of creating online identities, they gave contrasting views as to the persona of their avatars. The FGD participants pointed out that the identity, including the behavior, of the avatars of the gamers were based on their real life character. And as gamers continued to immerse themselves in the online world, they tended to alter

the avatar based on their gaming experience. This was especially true for both novice and occasional gamers, who still observed the behaviors of advanced gamers playing inside the online realm. When they saw the strategies as successful, they subsequently adopted it. Thus, they were what Rogers (in Littlejohn 2005) considered as "late adopters". In contrast, socializing and diehard gamers easily adopted ideas or gameplay strategies. Given their extensive gaming experience they had become the 'experts' whom the novices and occasional gamers emulated. In a manner of speaking, the advanced gamers "rule" the subculture. It is also noteworthy that socializing and diehard gamers no longer minded the development of their characters. In contrast, the novice and occasional gamers, being new to the realm, were still conscious of forming their own online persona.

Deriving from symbolic interactionism, the findings indicate two different approaches to the formation of online identities among gamers. The approach of novice and occasional gamers to identity formation hewed closely to the process posited in the theory: They saw different meanings from the actions of other experienced gamers; developed certain thoughts in their minds and decided to follow the dictates of the subculture; and expressed themselves and negotiated their identities through their online character and language. They allowed themselves be carried by the subculture. In contrast, the socializing and diehard gamers approached identity formation quite differently. They knew not to always follow the lead of other players based on their long experience as gamers. By thinking their own thoughts and expressing them through distinct language, they strengthened their influence within the subculture.

Indeed, Dizon believed that the creation of online personas was largely the decision of the gamers themselves. According to him, because of anonymity, all gamers, regardless of type, were free to transfer their real-life identities to their avatars as "an extension of their selves". But they could also choose to

be someone else and create a whole new character with a whole new set of attitudes, behavior, and external attributes. He mentioned that there were gamers who alienated other gamers with their identity by using a character with a different gender.

*Ways by which gamers share their ideas
and form relationships online*

Both the FGD participants and the researchers noted that the online game subculture had its own distinct language not unlike that of other subcultures. There was a collection of words inside the virtual world that was understood well by the gamers. In concurrence, Dizon stressed that online gamers tended to talk among themselves in a unique way different from other subcultures inside the Internet and the outside world. The unique set of words and expressions would have meanings known only by online gamers, an observation that is informed by the theories of symbolic convergence and diffusion of innovation.

The FGD discussants, for example, pointed out that most of the words they used in online gaming were coined from those used in the outside world and were then adopted within the whole virtual subculture. In short, since the Filipino culture in the real world uses Filipino as the main language, the words used inside the subculture are, naturally, Filipino, with modifications to suit the online gaming subculture. For example, the FGD participants mentioned the use of words like "amfness" or "ampota",[1] usually expressed to denote frustration or disgust on failing to, say, kill an online enemy. Another term is "walang sawsaw", which, to reiterate, is used by a gamer attacking a villain to warn others to leave him alone and not to intervene with the gamer in exchange for the prize at stake. The researchers were unable to get empirical information on how terms like these got adopted in online gaming. However, taking off from the study's research framework, some explanations may be proffered.

Using symbolic convergence, words such as "amfness" may have actually started as a fantasy shared by one gamer in the chat box. It may have sounded good for the other gamers, so they eventually adopted the newly-coined word themselves. This might now be labeled as a fantasy chain reaction. Applying the theory of diffusion of innovation, "amfness" may be considered as an innovation that was communicated by a gamer to another, passed on to other gamers, resulting in a critical mass that facilitated the adoption of the word in online gaming vocabulary. In both cases, these theories show that language is indeed not just a tool for communication, but more importantly, unity.

Still on language use, one of the researchers found himself courteously introducing his online character to the other gamers by using expressions such as "Hi po!" or "Hello po!",[2] which is similar to real-life etiquette standards – the Filipino value of respect for others. Here, it may be inferred that Philippine culture is again reflected in the creation of these unique terms to fit the virtual gaming subculture. Filipinos are known to be creative, especially in the formation of new words that become an instant hit to the whole society.

The tendency of human beings to use euphemisms in place of taboo words or cuss words, especially in the Philippines, so as not to offend or hurt other people, is also reflected in online game lingo. An evidence is "amfness" or "ampota," and similar replacements for cuss words. This shows that while online gamers may have the tendency to be carried away by their emotions while playing, they are still able to maintain their "human" side by giving respect to others even in the form of language.

Some of the participants said that they use animated emoticons to express their feelings while playing online. These emoticons have been programmed through the use of shortcut keys. *Shortcut keys* enable faster expression of thoughts through emoticons or pre-set dialogs. Texts and pre-set dialogs appear

on the *dialog* or *chat box*, while emoticons appear as captions on the heads of the avatars. The use of these expressions is not original to online gaming; it is a practice that has long been used in emails and the short messaging service (SMS), or *texting*.

Analyzing these points, it may be concluded that verbal or 'typewritten' language is the main avenue for the sharing of ideas among gamers within the subculture. The sharing of ideas consequently leads to the formation of online relationships. According to Dizon, online gamers, similar to young people in real life, are inclined to meet new friends. The FGD participants agreed with this. One even disclosed that she builds online friendships with other gamers by meeting with them at least thrice a week, through playing online. Another participant explained that just like in real-life friendships, the sameness of interests and likes are a factor for online friendships to last. Another related that gamers may find a boyfriend or girlfriend while playing online, just like her friend who met his girlfriend through playing online. That is, their online relationship later extended to real life. However, one FGD participant dismissed the idea of online friendships as vague because there is no assurance that the gamers one befriends online will also be his or her friends in the real world.

From the informants' responses, it may be inferred that while online games serve as a form of entertainment by satisfying the dreams and imaginations of the gamers in playing through creating alternate identities, the players still look for a sense of reality. Again, this view is characteristic of the Filipino culture–the common belief that, "to see is to believe".

In addition, online relationships, Dizon said, are also manifest in the social groups such as guilds and parties that are formed online. These groups are similar to "tribes", or social groups existing in the actual world.

Guilds are groups formally established by a *guild master,* the guild's founder, after fulfilling game requirements such as monetary quota (amount possessed by the online character)

and rare items. As a small group, a guild may look like a small real-life fraternity. However, one FGD participant pointed out that up to 56 members may be included in the guild; in this case, the guild becomes more of an organization with the guild master as its "president". That participant added that organizational structure is evident in the importance given by the guild master to the ranks and statuses of the guild members. These members have one thing in common: they carry a distinct symbol to represent the group. The researchers have seen that teamwork is the key factor for the guild to succeed, as based on the concerted efforts of some guilds to kill their enemies online.

Parties are the equivalent of a real-life peer group where members are bound with friendship ties, rather than ranks and gamer status as used in guilds. The concept of parties implies that the relationships of gamers may transcend the boundaries of the online world, since they are mostly composed of real-life friends or acquaintances who also know each other online.

The presence of these social groups implies that online games support the argument that individuals are, by nature, social beings. Individuals have the natural tendency to meet other people, and so are the gamers involved in the virtual subculture. And as gamers forge more relationships with other gamers, continuous interaction happens, and ideas are once more exchanged to form, recreate and expand the virtual subculture.

Online relationships, in general, are bound by rules. These rules set the limits needed to maintain the "health" of the virtual subculture, such as the limit of members and the required monetary quota in a guild, or the prohibition on the usage of cuss words in chat boxes. However, as observed by the researchers in their participant observations, these rules only give gamers, or in the strictest sense, Filipino gamers motivation to create innovations. This is especially evident in "amfness" and similar derivations from cuss words, as used in language. This is reflective of the Filipino trait of being innovative in facing real-life challenges, and the negative trait of violating the rules

or being "pasaway" (disobedient). And from the point of view of communication, while rules may be said to limit communication patterns, these actually lead gamers to create new ways of communicating with other gamers, which in turn, help expand the virtual subculture in online gaming. This, in turn, keeps the online playground "alive".

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown that, indeed, online games serve as a venue for the formation of a virtual subculture. The game is like a crucible where elements come together. The Internet connection allows gamers to play with others of different backgrounds and personalities around the world. Playing online games involves interaction with other gamers, and it is through this that relationships are formed. The presence of such interaction creates a tendency to form patterns in communication or gameplay.

A virtual subculture does not exist in a vacuum. To begin with, nothing is created if the actions within the game are not consistent. Constant interaction through various forms of communication in the game enables the gamers to form the virtual subculture. Communication thus plays a vital role in the formation of a virtual subculture. When gamers chat or fight together, a relationship is formed. This is the starting point for the creation of a virtual subculture within the game.

Gamers must enter first the game and create an avatar or a character. When the game begins, meanings are then shared within it, meanings are understood or learned as the gamer continues to enter and play the online game. Gamers embody in their avatar their online identity. They design it according to their taste or desire. With the infinite permutations in developing avatars, gamers have the freedom to choose the attributes of their online persona. The gamers, together with their online personas, are the main players in the virtual subculture. They

are the ones who create, recreate, and maintain this subculture through the employment of tools for communication and interaction.

Time is an essential factor in the virtual subculture. The longer the gamer stays within the online game, the greater the possibilities that meanings are shared, relationships are formed, and interactions are continued. It also sets the trend whether a subculture is maintained or abandoned. Moreover, the categories for the gamers are based on time. Novice gamers may use a little portion of their time playing compared with the occasional, socializing, and diehard gamers, who have consumed greater amounts of time than beginners. Thus, gamers differ in the influences they diffuse to, and acquire from, the existing virtual subculture.

Implications and Recommendations

Online games have created a separate world wherein players exchange information, perform several tasks, venture on thrilling quests, build and maintain characters, relationships, etc., and thrive on a unique way of life. Because of this, they have become a medium of communication for some people. The entertainment factor, the interactivity, and the interconnection to various places simultaneously, enable gamers to be almost "everywhere", doing different tasks at the same time. Thus, there is a need for a healthy virtual subculture for the benefit of all gamers, especially the new ones. Gamers must minimize using cuss words while inside the subculture, regardless of the euphemisms that could be used.

Gamers now have greater opportunities than they used to when online games were not yet available, especially in the Philippines. Used today in some ways as an alternative communication device, gamers are brought closer to each other even as they entertain themselves. Simultaneously, the virtual subculture hooks the gamers since they know that there is

something "alive" within the game that they should somehow attend to. The continuous interaction among gamers results in the continuous maintenance and expansion of the virtual subculture in online games. In effect, gamers are addicted to playing online for as long as half of a whole day. The gamers must realize that while online games are a source of leisure and a medium for communication, they must still check their health by getting enough sleep or rest, and keeping track of mealtime.

In this regard, friends, families, and other social institutions, especially mass media, play an important role in creating awareness among young people about issues around them. As such, they should be tapped in information-education efforts aimed at teaching the youth about responsible gaming.

Online games and the virtual subculture present a lot of possibilities for scholarly studies. Researchers can go deeply into the subject by using quantitative methods in understanding abstract concepts, such as effectiveness of communication and self-esteem within the game and the subculture. Qualitative studies, similar to this study, may also be undertaken involving other kinds of informants and/or participants, especially because as earlier noted, there is a dearth of studies on online gaming in the Philippines. Textual analyses of different online games could also be conducted to uncover, for example, socio-cultural discourses embedded in these games.

This study concentrated only on the online behavior of the gamers. Future researches may consider the effects of the virtual subculture on the behavior and interactions of the gamers once they are outside the online world. Since their online behavior is, most of the time, closely linked with their real-life behavior, the connection between the two should be explored in future studies.

Notes

1   "Amfness" is a combination of the contraction of the Filipino
     cuss word "anak ng puta", which means "son of a bitch" in
     English, and the suffix "-ness," supposedly to denote a state or
     condition of disgust. "Ampota", meanwhile, is just the
     contraction of the same cuss word.
2   In English, this is the equivalent of the conventional "Hi, sir/
     madam!" or "Hello, sir/madam!" The Filipino expression *po* is
     used to denote respect to another person usually older or of a
     higher political (as between a public servant and an ordinary
     citizen) or socioeconomic (an executive and an employee) status
     than the speaker.

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