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Gaming and e-information

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‘The user, the customer, the “Digital Consumer”... knowing them, understanding their needs, how can we deal with them in the remote Web environment? What are some of the challenges that we face as we embrace new e-information technologies? Legal issues, security, risks and expectations... How should and can we prepare ourselves to take on these challenges?’... These questions continuously flash in my mind, hot from the conference, but as I revisit the theme of the conference – Innovation – these questions fall in place. Innovation is an essential component in the development of e-information and information professionals if we are to continue to deliver effective e-information services and satisfy the “digital consumer”¹. Information professionals will find themselves constantly striving to find new ways and fresh ideas to improve their e-information service in order to meet the changing needs, demands and expectations of a growing group of users; users who are not only well-accustomed to the dynamic and fluid environment of the Web, but also increasingly evolving as “Consumers” who expect and demand technologically sophisticated and engaging interactions with e-information spaces. Faced with this long-drawn and uphill race to innovate, is there anywhere that information professionals can look, for reference and guidance to better shape their services to the demands of the customers? In my opinion, online games.

In my entry to the conference student award, I argued that one of the most innovative developments in e-information lies in the use of games and elements of game environments to enhance e-information services. Computer games, and online games such as Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are complex systems where a range of player activities and actions (communicating, interacting, and the creation and manipulation of virtual content) take place simultaneously. Online games are also widely known for their highly interactive and immersive game environments that can engage a broad range of players². More importantly, the ongoing advancement of games not only exemplifies how game producers have effectively managed user expectations and needs, but also catered to their evolving demands in a sustainable manner.

¹ *Digital Consumers: Reshaping the Information Profession* eds. David Nicholas and Ian Rowlands (Facet Publishing, 2008)

² Andrew Hinton, “We Live Here: Games, Third Places and the Information Architecture of the Future.” *The Information Society for the Information Age*, 2006

Though e-information service providers and online games provide seemingly different services, there in fact have much in common. Both types of services are user-centred, and are used by large numbers of people. At the same time, both services often involve simultaneous participation by many distributed online users who access and affect large quantities of data. In this respect, technical, interface and communication attributes of online games are of particular relevance to the developers of e-information services. An awareness of these games' attributes can provide information service providers with (i) clues to the myriad ways in which people can and do use online systems, (ii) ideas for fresh or enhanced means of providing access to digital information and (iii) references to technical aspects of complex online game services and systems that serve many simultaneous users¹.

Current attention and interests of information professionals concerning Web 2.0 highlight parallels between online games and an emerging generation of online services that are not only more open, but also offer greater user-control. E-information spaces such as Facebook, Second Life and Wikipedia are exemplars of the use of immersive-yet-permeable game-like environments that bring new levels of engagement and interaction between users and information providers². Successful application of game environments and the information architecture of games to a wide variety of e-information services, for example, e-marketing through sponsor-driven games, using virtual simulation games for training professionals such as surgeons and pilots, and the integration of e-learning games into school curricula are also evidence of emerging opportunities for innovative and effective delivery of services by e-information service providers³.

Online games such as MMOGs and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMORPGs) have been effectively using participative features and communications within the games to encourage greater user manipulation and engagement with the game and fellow players. Such games can become excellent models and references in the effective deployment and management of similar features in e-information service sites, especially if e-information providers are more inclined to adopt Web 2.0 features. Similarly, as information professionals are exploring ways of milking the value of user-generated content and the potential of folksonomies, a variety of games have in fact successfully integrated user-generated content into their game environments and game plays. User-generated game environments and the users' ability to customise the game to something infinitely bigger than the original game itself

¹ "Parallel Worlds: Online Games and Digital Information Services."

² Andrew Hinton, "We Live Here: Games, Third Places and the Information Architecture of the Future." *The Information Society for the Information Age*, 2006

³ Kurt Squire, "From Content to Context: Videogames as Designed Experience," *Educational Researcher*, 35 (2006), 19–29

were major features of the game, Quake, when it was released in 1996¹. From game rules to graphics, sound and game maps, everything could be customized by a community of game coders. They were part of a larger community that included game and map designers and many thousands of players who played and socialised, both in the game and outside it, in chat rooms, blogs, discussion forums and newsgroups.

This concept of surrounding the game with a strong user community that is closely linked to the game itself is yet another worthy consideration for e-information service providers, especially those involved with electronic archives and library services when developing new generations of finding aids to facilitate user exploration of archives and library holdings. Doing so will not only allow archives and libraries to provide an additional layer of help to their users in seeking the information they require; in addition, archives and libraries will have added opportunities to study their users' preferences, navigation and search behaviours, in order to improve their services. Similarly for intranet administrators, useful insights can also be gained from studying the dynamics of game user-communities and the tools that facilitate communication, sharing of information and interaction within the communities.

As we have heard from speakers at the conference², information professionals are no strangers to the technical and security issues that come along with a large user base and extended scale of usage. As e-information services progress, information professionals will inevitably face technical and security issues that will grow and evolve in proportion and complexity. Failure to tackle these issues appropriately can have severe implications. Online games are potentially useful technical references and yardsticks for security issues for e-information service providers. Online games allow many thousands of people to play and interact simultaneously. The game, Ultima Online, for example, recorded more than 160,000,000 man-hours of playing time in a year³. Technically, such online games require a massive and robust infrastructure, as slow service tends to frustrate players and deter them from continuing with the game. Likewise, e-information services that suffer slow service due to poor technological infrastructure could easily be regarded by users to provide unreliable service or be shunned for other information sites that are deemed more capable of keeping up with their users. Security is also a major issue that is common between online games (especially MMOGs) and e-information service providers. Often online games face security issues that can range from malicious hacking that try to crash the game, or cause large-scale interferences, to benign practices such as finding shortcuts to enhance the players' game

¹ Andrew Hinton, "We Live Here: Games, Third Places and the Information Architecture of the Future." *The Information Society for the Information Age*, 2006

² The UKeIG Annual Conference, Manchester, June 2009

³ "Parallel Worlds: Online Games and Digital Information Services"

status. Game maintainers attend to these security breaches seriously to avoid the mass exodus and loss of disgruntled game players to other competing games and more importantly the associated loss of revenue that will result¹. While e-information service providers may not face similar security and fairness issues as online games maintainers, they nonetheless remain highly susceptible to other forms of security breaches that can result in equally damaging consequences. Generally, e-information service providers that aim to cater to users of a size and scale that is comparable to MMOGs can potentially take reference from the information and technical infrastructure as well as security measures of online games as they are often maintained at a highly advanced level².

The parallels between e-information services and online games that have been highlighted and explored above are by no means exhaustive. There are still issues of risk management, various aspects of legislation and rights management, and more that can be explored. As we continue to seek ideas and references to guide us in creating new means of interacting with our customers, engaging them and their information needs, as well as meeting the challenges that comes along with the new approaches, it is always comforting to know that there are many other Web services out there that we can potentially draw inspirations and guidance from. To me, online games is an excellent model of reference that I will tap on and there are probably more that we can look towards in the 'crazy' world of the Web. But more importantly, as Lisa (Charnock) and Lisa (Jeskins) have stressed in their breakout sessions, try them out!

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¹ "Parallel Worlds: Online Games and Digital Information Services."

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