

Video game Everquest 2 provides new way to study human behavior

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Can researchers study the populations of online video games, like Everquest 2, just as they study traditional communities like Miami, Pittsburgh or Minneapolis? A research study by a University of Minnesota computer scientist and colleagues from across the country shows that online, interactive gaming communities are now so massive that they mirror traditional communities. These findings are creating a new evolution of social science research where researchers are able to study human behavior using the game.

The research team analyzed three years of data (over 60 terabytes) from the complete server logs and click-streams of Sony's popular PC game EverQuest 2. The data tracked every action performed in one of the world's most popular massively multiplayer online (MMO) games. Everquest 2 has more than 300,000 players who average 26 hours per week playing the game. Because of the intense level of involvement and multi-player environment of the game, the researchers were able to study human behavioral dynamics using the game as a proxy.

The researchers used the virtual world to model the social and behavioral dynamics of individuals, groups, and networks within large communities. Their study presented evidence that the social sciences are at the

threshold of a fundamental shift not only in our understanding of the social and behavioral sciences, but also the ways in which we study them.

The research team includes University of Minnesota computer science and engineering professor Jaideep Srivastava; Northwestern University professor Noshir Contractor; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign professor Scott Poole; and University of Southern California assistant professor Dmitri Williams. They recently presented their findings at a 90-minute symposium "Analyzing Virtual Worlds: Next Step in the Evolution of Social Science Research" at this year's annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the world's largest meeting of scientists.

Source: University of Minnesota

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