Tribes: The Study of an Online Community

Tribes is an online multiplayer game where different missions, worlds, weapons, and players combine to create a defend and destroy kind of gaming experience. Players use mouse, key, and voice commands to target and destroy the enemy as they sneak around trying to capture the other team's flag and return it to their own base. But it is more than just a game that these players have created with Tribes. They have created a whole online community with an interactive website leading to discussion forums and chat rooms, where the action really takes place.

Call it a behind the scenes look at Tribes. Teams are put together, players are taught and assisted, and even more so, long-lasting friendships are made. I studied the discussion forums of Tribalwar.com and continually entered the Tribal war chat room hosted by the server irc.dynamix.com for a period of two weeks. I found an online community full of life constantly being infested with anything from small talk to serious gaming talk.

In the article "Log on and Shoot," Katie Hafner discusses online gaming becoming a sort of addiction. She claims it is turning into a "virtual party" and that oftentimes the game becomes the underdog when conversation takes over (Hafner 75). And this, Hafner says, is the kind of stuff that gaming networks want. They want to have the social environment it takes to create an online type of community for gamers in order to keep their clients and players devoted (Hafner 75).

T ribalwar.com states that the "Most users ever online was 212 on 09-23-2002 at 04:20 AM" (tribalwar.com). Take note of the time. With that many people actively using tribalwar.com in the early hours of the AM, it is only plausible that every time I read the discussion forums there were never less than 150 members and guests currently active. Every post had responses. MIRC is the program in which the Tribes chat room server is put to use. Irc.dynamix.com is a specifically registered server for individual channels based around Tribes and the Tribes community. As Hafner says, "The trick now [for interactive games over the Internet] is to create 'social worlds' rich in graphics for games of all kinds, featuring chat spaces where players can boast to one another, commiserate over a defeat or just pass the time of day" (74). In the tribal war chat room there were always 150-200 people present, with approximately 25 to 35 participating in conversations at a time. I often left my guest name signed on overnight and remained idle, only to wake up to a whole assortment of conversations. It is this kind of dedication and commitment of constant involvement that it takes to make an online community and keep it alive and well.

One thing that often took place was, as expected, discussions about Tribes. Through MIRC, players learn scripting and programming. Scripts were often exchanged so players could learn how to do things faster. Players teach each other every day about how to perfect their aim or graphics. At one point I intervened during a conversation asking if anyone was willing to talk with me about Tribes as an online community. Masquerade talked one on one with me and offered this, "All you have to do is ask anyone how to use a certain line of code for programming or html or java and they can easily tell you what and how it works" (#tribalwar 10/16/02). Oftentimes in the chat room all kinds of terms extremely foreign to me were being tossed around.

"#Estrogen is in siege mode atm," player Daemon posted at one point (#tribalwar 10/15/02). I figured out that #estrogen was another chat room hosted by irc.dynamix.com consisting of females. Later, talking to another player, I realized that 'atm' was an acronym for 'at the moment.' "Siege mode" still remains an unfamiliar term to me. Another time I was reviewing conversation in the chat room I found that a player named Vang had said, "I'm about to start DdoS on wctoc. I need people to refresh, k?" (#tribalwar 10/15/02). Shortly after his statement, various other members agreed to "refresh" for him.

Different forums were also dedicated to this kind of stuff. One forum containing 2094 threads is entitled TW Tech. The description reads, "Depository for various user tech help knowledge bases and questions" (TW Tech, tribalwar.com) Currently, 13,941 posts exist on it. Topics of threads range from "How do you set chanserv so everyone who joins is oped to voiced?" to "XP tips and tricks right here" (TW Tech, tribalwar.com) I know what neither of these mean, and the answers are in just the same language as the thread topics. The topics containing the most replies had subjects that players were able to elaborate on, such as tutorials, tricks and tips, and guides.

If they weren't talking about Tribes specifically, they may have been referring to it. In other words, at one point during an MIRC conversation, about 30 people all became involved in a sort of game of trying to get their quotes accepted on tribalwar.com. Every time anyone opens the web page in the top right corner there is a quote submitted by a member or guest. They are more often than not jokes, funny, or sarcastic. All the people involved in the conversation continually sent in quotes and tried to get them accepted. It started because one person presented a problem, and then everyoneelse joined in conversation because they had the same problem. "Are you experienced," "Void where prohibited by law," "Accept this quote, and ill buy a TW hat. I swear. I JUST WANT ONE ACCEPTED, JEEBUS CHRIST," and "Please do not feed the animals," were just a few of the quotes (#tribalwar 10/14/02). It wasn't as easy as they would have liked it to be. For over a half an hour the topic was based around who could get the best and funniest quotes accepted. People continually posted what quotes they were submitting while everyone else joked them, laughed with them, or shared the bitterness of not getting quotes accepted.

Tribalwar.com: We're behind you. Right now. Tribalwar.com: We know where you live.
Tribalwar.com: Bitch, please Tribalwar.com: Its what`s for dinner

Conversations got serious when topics turned over to that of National news—the Sniper, a mysterious killer in the Virginia and Maryland areas. He's been in the news constantly, and once one person mentioned him in the chat room, many other people had related stories. People were talking about friends and family they had in areas where the Sniper had been, and how crazy it was to them all.

During the conversations that were informal, there was still a certain language that was obvious and apparent. Acronyms of all sorts were used, some that I didn't understand at all. For instance, "rofl" was used often meaning 'rolling on floor laughing.' Be right back was used a lot: "brb." They also type things like "1337" or "r337" meaning elite. I don't understand why "r337" means elite, but talking one on one with the player/member Champion I learned that. I asked him why and got a response of "because we felt like it" (#tribalwar 10/17/02). As he uses the 'we' he is inadvertently tying himself into the Tribes community and representing it as a whole.

Speaking with Champion I learned many other aspects of the community. He told me that MIRC is often used as a means for "Tribes people to learn how to download music and pictures," as well as all I have already specified (#tribalwar 10/17/02). He also noted that they have the ability to meet game designers and programmers through MIRC (#tribalwar 10/17/02).

"I got to beta test Tribes for Playstation 2 like 5 months before the release," Champion said (#tribalwar 10/17/02). He, along with about 200 other people, was able to do this because of people on MIRC that work for Dynamix.

Serious Tribes players take their community one step further though. Local area network, or LAN parties, are held annually. Champion told me there are 4-5 LAN parties a year for Tribes (#tribalwar 10/17/02). This means that 200-500 Tribes players gather together and attend a convention, where the ultimate in online gaming is experienced. " 'The fact that it's a social environment is what makes it the killer app of the online medium,'" Hafner quotes Lawrence Schick saying (75). Literally sitting beside opponents that had never before had a face behind the name on the screen, players come

together and spend multiple days interacting not only online, but also face-to-face. It is the coming together of a faceless community, where players learn the true meaning of looking to the inside for the quality of a person. Tribalwar.com thrives of life and friendships that really aren't possible in any other situations. A few times a year, this online community becomes more than that, and it is this kind of commitment and love for the game that keeps it alive.

Works Cited:

Hafner, Katie. "Log on and Shoot." The Wired Society. Ed. Carol Lea Clark.
New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999. 73-75.

Internet Relay Chat. 13 October 2002. 27 October 2002. <http://www.mirc.com>

Tribal War. 27 October 2002. 27 October 2002. <http://www.tribalwar.com>

Tribes Chat Room. 13-17 October 2002. #tribalwar. 13-17 October 2002. <http://www.mirc.com>

"TW Tech." Online Posting. 7 & 11 October 2002. 16 October 2002.
<http://www.tribalwar.com/forums/>