One big happy family playing online games

Internet chat rooms are passe, friendships are being formed through online gaming ‘clans’

BY CHRISTOPHER CHOO

THE World Wide Web did a lot to widen my horizons. In the 1990s, when Internet chat rooms were the rage, I spent quite a few hours each day chatting to students from other schools — people I would otherwise have had little opportunity to meet.

Not long after, I fell in love with online gaming. I met people who shared the same passion for slaying monsters and demons and exploring vast and wondrous lands.

With the Internet, I was able to immerse myself in the lives of people half a world away.

I remember at the age of 16 lending a listening ear to a financially-strapped divorcee in the United States who had two children and who constantly had problems paying rent.

I was able to enter the lives of people from different cultures and of different ages, and communicate with them as peers because of the anonymity of online gaming.

More than just making one-to-one connections with people, I found myself becoming part of an online community, or in gaming parlance, a clan or guild.

Not unlike the clans of our forefathers, these communities set their own agendas, recruit new members, appoint their own leaders, and even wage wars with rival factions.

I use the term “community” because these groupings foster a sense of camaraderie among their members and are often the starting point of long-lasting friendships.

For some, these online friendships are easier to forge than offline ones.

Jacqueline Tay, a 19-year-old polytechnic student who has been gaming for four years, says: “People judge others by their appearance first before deciding to get to know them better in the real world.”

“When you talk to someone online, you can tell the person almost anything and you won’t be judged in the same way,” she adds.

Very often, in the course of gaming, the games cease to be an end in themselves — they become a means for bonding with other people.

So intense is the gaming experience, I have heard of marriages that have resulted from it. There’s even a case of an estranged couple who used online gaming to repair their marriage.

And let’s not forget the sheer pleasure of being able to escape from the real world.

There’s nothing I like better after a long, hard day at school than to build a massive army that wreaks havoc and destroys everything in its path — just to help me unwind.

As I log on to play a game of Starcraft or Counterstrike, I am reminded of the wide network of friends and acquaintances I have built over the years.

And I can’t help feeling nostalgic about these friendships. Much of this wouldn’t have been possible if not for the common thread that binds us together — online gaming.

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