

Guild Building Is Skill Building

By Stephen Gillett

In 1997 Origin Systems released Ultima Online (UO), a game that ushered in a new genre now referred to as Massive Multi-Player Online Role Playing Game, or MMPORPG. This same model was also later adopted by other companies with the launch of games such as Lineage, EverQuest, Asheron's Call, and World of Warcraft.

MMPORPG immersed participants in a real-time virtual world that allowed individual gamers to create unique and customized avatars within the game. These three-dimensional images reflected the egos, or in some cases alter egos, of the gamers themselves and allowed them to interact un-self-consciously with one another.

What's more, gamers began to ally themselves with various virtual-society forces that started to take shape as hundreds of thousands of other players populated these new and unexplored worlds. Thanks to relative anonymity, gamers were released from the expectations of societal values, mores, and norms. This produced a new outlet that allowed gamers to enter a world in which antiquated concepts of chivalry, magery, honor, and sacrifice were very much alive and enthusiastically embraced. The new reality was an environment in which one could align himself with the forces of darkness or the enterprises of good.

With the population growing by tens of thousands per month, a virtual society began to take root. The emergence of various trades, classes, guilds, and career vagabonds grew, and gamers capitalizing on previous experiences (both real and virtual) now, for the first time, had an environment in which they could hone their gaming skills and evolve new ones to navigate this new and unshaped society. In a realm with thousands of gamers, new leaders emerged and new leadership qualities were gained and applied.

The influences these new, young leaders cultivated often spanned cultures, languages, personalities, and geography. The expertise required to create and evolve guilds would contribute to the leadership skill set of these young players that would eventually incorporate lessons adapted for the real world. A new social-learning paradigm was created, and the world of the MMPORPG became its Ivy League university.

At the very center of this paradigm is the guild, a close community of online players who share a common play style, value system, and sense of adventure. Guilds can be formed around many core beliefs or values, such as race, skill, trade, geography, and gaming style.

The structure of a guild embodies different forms, depending on the game, but shares a common organizational theme. To better understand this, consider the structure of real-world corporations. They typically have executives (a chief executive officer and chief financial officer, for example), a management tier (executive vice president and senior vice president), and employees (senior and associate-level positions). This basic structure exists in most companies, yet the defining characteristics of every organization yields a unique and individual organization.

Guilds operate in a similar manner. In this presentation, I will focus on the guild concept of a World of Warcraft (WoW) Guild, but will also introduce themes from other

games, in particular Ultima Online¹. The guild master (GM) is the head of the guild and is the ultimate authority on all guild-related matters. The GM is charged with many activities that correlate to the duties a CEO of a company. What follows is a detailed exploration of some of these similarities.

The Life of a Company vs. the Life of a Guild

Raising Capital

CEO: To form a startup venture, a CEO must explore sources of capital from investors in a seed round or series A venture organizations. The CEO (or founder) is typically charged with raising this capital and building a founding team. The funds can be derived from several sources, including assets provided by the CEO, his friends and family, angel investors, institutions, or venture-capital investors.

GM: The GM must also adopt these very same concepts in order to create and fund a new guild. The GM must recruit a group of 10 founders as set by game defaults and raise enough virtual capital to incorporate the guild, define a charter, and begin to recruit talent and skills. These 10 founders also typically contribute the necessary virtual capital. The role of the GM at the inception of the guild is absolutely critical because the stability of the founding team is the bedrock that will support the future stability and aptitude of the guild. The GM must pay special attention to the selection of the founding members, and attempt to assemble a team that is representative of the players the guild aims to recruit. A diversified and democratic founding guild team structure will help maintain control, enforce decisions, apprentice players, and recruit and retain talent.

Incorporating the Organization

CEO: The CEO of an organization must incorporate the new company. He must assemble a team of reputable founders who instill confidence in the groups they approach for funding and in the members they approach for recruitment.

GM: The GM must follow this same route and be sensitive to the same issues when recruiting 10 guild founders. This process is difficult, since it often takes several weeks or months to assemble the right team; meanwhile, the GM must simultaneously monitor the founders already recruited. When you are trying to recruit your tenth founder, it is very possible that earlier founders who have signed your charter will be recruited elsewhere or grow weary of the process and abandon the cause.

Selling the overall vision of the guild to better define key attributes—the guild’s purpose, goals, and roles of the founding team--must be done with extreme sensitivity. Doing so will sustain your charter signatories throughout the process of identifying founders and during the early growth of the guild. The founders must buy into the key attributes and have a tangible sense of their involvement. Their loyalty and participation will be significantly higher if they feel their input in the decision-making process is taken into account. This early “decision equity” is the key ingredient to building a successful, lasting guild, and helps sustain membership long after inception. Often when I am counseling other GMs who are forming a guild, it quickly becomes evident that they do

¹ *In the interest of full disclosure, I was Guild Master of highly ranked guild from 1998-2001 on Ultima Online and currently serve as Senior Officer/Founder of a newly started WoW guild of approx 50 members and growing fast.*

not spend adequate time explaining to the founding team the guild's vision and instilling a sense of equity in the success of the guild.

Defining a Charter/Mission Statement

CEO: Once the seed funding or series A funding has materialized and term sheets are signed, the CEO must work to clarify the mission of the company. Effective messaging is critical to delineate the company's overall direction and targeted market opportunities. While the CEO and founders may have defined a preliminary outline of a company charter and mission statement to raise funding, they must now solidify the charter and guide employees on a path that follows the overall company vision.

GM: The GM's role is very similar. After having assembled the guild's founding team and raising the funds needed to incorporate the guild, the GM must now define the guild's charter. This process should be done systematically and democratically. All founding members must have input and believe their ideas are represented in the charter. The guild resembles a parliamentary system, with each founder representing a class of player—by trade, race, and sex—that you eventually want to recruit. It is at this point in the charter formation that rank, privilege, code of conduct, and overall vision are defined. The GM must act like a CEO at times, but a guild meeting among founders should be an open-forum in order to facilitate the creation of the charter. See our current guild charter here [Charter of "The Azure Blades"](#)

Recruiting Talent

CEO: Once the company has been founded, the CEO must build an organization that will recruit talent. The CEO may be integral in the hiring of the first employees, but the overall success of recruiting results from building an organization that is attractive for potential employees. The organization must also have an internal team that understands and identifies with the type of employee the company aims to recruit. The CEO develops a structure that empowers one or more senior members to make decisions in his absence. Once this is completed, the CEO turns his attention to other functions of the company.

GM: The GM involvement in recruiting talent for the guild is similarly critical. The process starts with direct responsibility for meeting and questing with initiates into the guild, but as the guild ranks become larger, the GM typically only approves the candidates as members or initiates.

The GM must take into account several critical issues when recruiting and retaining talent. The GM must initially try to balance the overall makeup of the guild. To do so, the guild management team should be educated about the type of members the guild will pursue. The GM then grants the management team the ability to recruit talent, but he must reserve final membership approval for himself or an officer. This reinforces the "decision equity" theory while at the same time allows other members of the guild to contribute to the overall structure of the community. This, I have found, helps resolve issues that arise when members feel that the guild is not aligned with their gaming style. As GM, it is always helpful to be able explain that guild members were recruited by all player types and not just the GM (who is himself a certain player/class). The player will usually take this into account and adjust his game play, rather than quit the guild in protest.

Having high-ranking officials represent the faction/class from which you wish to recruit enables a GM to fill the ranks of the guild with loyal members. It is much more powerful, for example, to have a high-level founding warrior-class character recruit guild warriors, and a high-level priest founder recruit priests. Diverse recruitment practices lead to overall guild loyalty because players feel they can relate to at least one member of their same skill level and class in the officer or veteran status of guild management.

The GM should establish the recruiting structure and allow it to take its course, then bolster recruiting efforts to achieve overall guild needs. For example, if a guild has a large warrior class, it helps to have other guild members skilled in creating armor and weapons. The GM should look for this type of balance and supplemental skill needs to facilitate overall interactive game play and interaction among guild members.

The dynamics of guild building change, as they do with a startup corporation. In the initial stages, it is easier to recruit members because the benefits of being an early member are obvious. Later in the game, as most players may have flirted with joining a guild or are active members of a guild, the selection criteria for new members must be addressed. Through many iterations of guild management, I have concluded the optimal pedigree for guild membership tends to be maturity in communications and maturity in action, although real age is of little importance. These two types of maturity make themselves evident in game play and interactions among guild members. Interaction maturity is, broadly, the ability to treat other members in the online community with a base level of respect and to be aware that they represent the guild at all times. Maturity in action in game play requires the guild member to take actions that benefit the entire group, and not just the individual.

Ceremony/Reward Structure

CEO: The CEO must establish the structure of a new company. Structure includes performance, rewards, ceremony, and recognition of employees. These efforts foster a corporate culture and help retain employees. In a successful company, it is vital that employees feel that they are a part of an organization that values and encourages new ideas.

GM: The GM, like the CEO, must also clearly define structure that includes ceremony, advancement, group approval, and sacrifice.

Ceremony plays a key role in guild participation and a sense of long-term loyalty and duty. In real life, ceremony is very important in human interaction and advancement. That's because most key events in our lives involve some form of ceremony, whether it is a preschool dance recital, high school graduation, or marriage. These events all signify the ending of one chapter and the beginning of another. Because ceremony is so essential, I also try to incorporate it into key events within a guild. These events may be small, such as the announcement of a level increase by a guild chat "ding" so that everyone can take note of the advancement and give recognition and praise for exemplary behavior in guild meetings.

These guild meetings should have an element of ceremony. For instance, an avatar might sit in certain areas with helms removed and weapons put away. Guild members enjoy the enforcement of these ceremony rites and rituals, which also reinforce their notions of loyalty by ceremony. In Ultima Online, for instance, I married several avatars to each other, events in which ceremony was strictly adhered to. This virtual

online matrimony ceremony allowed for the ceremonial bonding between two game players and provided reference points of legend within the guild at later dates that reinforced the bonds of the guild members of the time.

The next important factor is sacrifice. I look for key ways to show members that the guild will respond to the needs of its players. Recently I created a group quest in which all loot (treasure) gathered by guild members was applied toward the funding of a new mount for a guild member having problems gathering the funds on his own. This event was strategic and rare, but I decided to use it as an opportunity to show members that the guild senior leadership was aware of the plight of its members and would help when possible. While the group quest did not garner a large amount toward the needs of this particular guildie (as guild members are sometimes called), the campaign was highly noticeable and had a definite impact on participation and loyalty, the two critical areas of responsibility for the GM.

Finance and Administration

CEO: The effective CEO delegates the financial and administrative responsibilities of the company but closely monitors decisions, intervening in certain cases when necessary. The CEO always focuses on the overall vision of the company while providing tactical reinforcement to various units working toward this goal. He must be visibly engaged but not overpowering, and must be constantly aware of the company's overall goals and ensure that all internal groups meet these objectives. The CEO must build a system to resolve disputes and protect the integrity of the organization and its assets.

GM: The GM is faced with many similar responsibilities related to financial management and administration of the guild. The guild often manages assets (more in UO than WoW), and these assets must be protected and, in some cases, allocated and invested. As GM in Ultima Online, for instance, our guild castle has extremely rare treasures that must be monitored. The castle also contains wares donated by individual guild members that must be stored and allocated as needed to other guild members.

It is the job of the GM (or his designate) to field requests for these resources and allocate them according to need. I often took this opportunity to grant proven members of the guild privileged access to resources. This could be of rank, title, or access. I granted one member the title of guild treasurer, for instance, giving him responsibility to field requests from the guild members for monetary needs. The guild treasurer determined solutions to meet these needs, either from the guild treasury or group quests—or often a hybrid of both. While this reinforced membership loyalty and engagement, the appointment was also political in the sense that the new guild treasurer was a very popular player.

The GM and officers of the guild must also resolve disputes between guild members and field complaints about the guild. Recently I responded to a complaint that some guild members were discriminating against other races in the game. I intervened to maintain the integrity of our guild name, enforce the code of conduct, and take disciplinary action. During this investigative process I discovered that other senior and highly respected members of the guild had very significant issues with these particular guildies and the summation of this information eventually led to warnings and dismissal from the guild. I was, in essence, managing this person out of the organization.

Growth, Mergers, and Acquisitions

CEO: The CEO of an organization is charged with satisfying the company's customer base and maintaining a competitive advantage to attract and retain customers. The CEO can contribute to these efforts by partnering with other companies to fill a gap in its product offering. The CEO also can acquire companies that strengthen the overall assets of the organization. In extreme cases the company can merge with companies that offer advantageous synergy, resulting in better business prospects as a combined company.

GM: The GM, similarly, must continually look to create an environment and experience that challenges guild members and keeps its members from becoming disenfranchised and joining other guilds. I have known many guildies who were considering moving on to other guilds because they felt they needed a new experience. While some had very superficial needs, such as a new guild color, others had deep-seated needs that I later addressed in daily guild activities.

It is the duty of the GM to facilitate guild member interaction on many levels. Often the size of the guild and factors such as geography, time zone, language, and out-of-game duties, force the GM to forge treaties of cooperation with other guilds (called allied guilds, sister guilds, or partner guilds). As the CEO must form partnerships to retain customer loyalty, the GM must increase the available pool of interactions by forming alliances with other guilds. This allows the member of one guild to socialize, quest, trade, and duel with members of another guild, without having to give up their guild identity.

When a guild reaches about 40 players, the GM should consider partnerships to diversify game play for the guild members. I usually reach out to guilds that are located in far, remote areas of the virtual world. This seems to work best because those guild members have a natural curiosity about exploring our realm, and our guild members share that desire to investigate theirs. The sister guild provides a framework for this exploration, and enables the guildie to show off and take pride in his virtual community.

I use these guild partnerships as the first step toward a merger (or acquisition) of the guild. As GM, I make myself highly visible and engaged by participating in as many quests and interactions as possible. I do this so that members of the sister guild take notice and report back to their guild management. If the partnership is solid and our guilds cooperate with each other, I will formally (again, with ceremony at work) request counsel with the other guild master and officers, and propose a guild merger. Under the terms of the merger, I retain the senior leadership position and the other parties obtain privileged levels at the veteran or officer level. This was the primary method for growing my guild in Ultima Online, and the same methods I currently employ in WoW.

Conclusion

In the realm of the MMPORPG, players of all ages and backgrounds are exposed to concepts that can later be applied successfully to real-world endeavors. The leadership and organizational skills learned in online guild-building hold value for young adults who will eventually enter the workforce as well as to seasoned managers who are preparing for their next promotion. Running and maintaining a guild enables participants to anticipate adversity in the workplace, and provides a valuable experience as they

encounter issues they will face on the job. The bottom line? MMPORPG teaches valuable lessons in human interaction and exposes gamers to issues relating to leadership, cultural, diversity, and geography. It will provide an entire generation with a distinct competitive advantage over their Baby Boom predecessors in the workforce, both foreign and domestic.