Gaming Change:

Lessons for leadership through an appreciative inquiry and action learning approach.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on gaming environment strategies and how these strategies can benefit transformational leaders' in developing international core relationships with teams in a global organisation. To start, I will review internet strategies generally used by business to interact with customers. This review will inform us how these customer-focused strategies influence many leaders' implementation of specific team building strategies. I will then discuss the pros and cons of such an endeavour with specific focus on the affects in global organisations. Next, I will look the internet gaming environment, the perceptions associated with the word gaming, and how internet gaming can be a positive influence to cohesive team relationships. To end, I will look at the business advantage of internet gaming for global team building, how it creates positive effects for organisational culture, and its flow on effect to customer retention.

The current team building environments focus on direct localised groups within the global organisation's physical presence. Unfortunately, this tends to create silo conflict caused by region specific managers developing team relationships that translates poorly in regions with different cultural understanding. The result is businesses being managed on old models of localised control that divides the organisation and prevents it from taking a truly global stance. A transformational leader must therefore, develop creative strategies to encourage regional groups to interact with each other on all levels. They are required to do this as inexpensively as possible while continuing to provide strength to people and organisations to embrace change and increase work performance (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2001, p. 77).

This has become particularly difficult for leaders' to deliver in today's fast-paced global environment due to staff being globally disenfranchised from head office. Leaders now have to contend with the multi-faceted diversity of culture (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2001, pp. 406-419) and international team building (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2001, pp. 236-260) in an environment of ever decreasing budgets, which has resulted in leadership challenged to develop new ways of interacting with global teams. With more and more organisations taking up the globalisation mantle, these tensions continue to grow and often result in local staff feeling disconnected from international team members. The outcome often produces lost productivity and numerous mistakes made by unsuccessful communication. Despite the size of an organisation, the cost of teambuilding in the global village is too high to allow sensible action for resolution and has maintained the corporate drive to keep team building localised.

Over the past months, I have looked into solutions to provide a better way to bring multinational teams into a cohesive force. This initiative has been developed through the world of online gaming and the theory of gamification, discussed later in this paper. This dynamic and entertaining environment allows me to bring together the dynamics of multi-cultural identities in an anonymous and judgement-free way that facilitates personal interaction on a deep level. The gaming environment allows people to say what they want without fear of reprisal. The outcome is interaction on a deeper interpersonal level that helps to facilitate the resolution of tensions and foster trust. Further, issues can be heard with complete clarity while the mind is distracted on the pure entertainment scene, which helps prevent issues being directed on a personal level. The result has seen people change from a "you did" to "the problem is" mindset.

This level of trust and interaction has developed from having to solve problems in the game environment together. Interacting within this environment, players have been seen to build increased strength in character and stronger relationships where trust and support becomes the dominant ideology rather than blame and punishment, which has been the focus of traditional tactics. This also contributes to the growing literature on "Leaderful Organisations".

I have endeavoured within this paper to introduce this new environment but have avoided the temptation to provide in-depth methodology due to the papers constraints. To begin I will discuss the traditional business interaction with the internet and the connection to team building strategies.

THE INTERNET - Global toy or Business tool?

To begin I will look at how business generally use the internet to communicate with customers and how this has informed team-building strategies thus far. While this customer focus may seem unimportant, it paves the way for understanding the internet community concept. Further, it allows us to relate strategies for staff training that enhances internal communities as well as staff loyalty and customer retention. However, before we embark into this discussion it is important that I undertake a small journey into the history of internet communities and how they began as this will open the door to a deeper understanding towards their strengths and benefits.

The world of the internet is as wide and varied in what it communicates, as the way it communicates. The early years of the Internet saw information transmitted through newsgroups, which carried information on all manner of topics, and are seen to be the first type of internet community after their establishment in 1979 (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p. 19). These newsgroups provided an online outlet where discussions on every conceivable topic where carried out and resulted in millions of individual conversations in tens of thousands of newsgroups (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p. 19). While not a cutting edge platform, such as with Facebook and twitter, the newsgroup environment provided a space for innovation and creativity to take flight without reprisal in a world before the world wide web.

This continued through to the late 1960's, where the connection of Bulletin Board Systems ("BBS") began to bring local people, commonly geeks and nerds as they were referred to, from local communities via dial up modems. These BBS's connected into the Newsgroup environment through the intermediary software known as FIDONet (Schuyler, 1992). With FidoNet people from all over the world could connect to newsgroups through a local BBS and discuss any topic they pleased. Once connected, the user could access the recent updates to the newsgroups and post replies. However, this was far from the speed of communication we see today on facebook and twitter due to the general update mail hour being around midnight when BBS's all over the world would dial-in to the FidoNet servers for updates. Yet the system managed to bring complete strangers together to discuss anything from bad hair days to new products and innovation and despite its asynchronous nature, the BBS/Newsgroup systems brought shy and uneducated people together to share and learn. There was no ability to see race, age, sex or any other racial distinctions unless specifically stated within the newsgroup, that generally kept people apart which gave the community a new found voice not previously seen (Smith & Kollock, 1999, pp. 62-73).

The community drive of the newsgroup environment saw a range of additions created to include binary files of images and other media broken down into multiple parts of American Standard Code for Information Interchange ("ASCII"). These ASCII files were quick to transmit and recombine at the users end and saw a new phenomenon open to users that could now share, from their slow modem speeds, a plethora of information that was previously closed to them. Of course, like all open doors, internet users became quick to exploit this innovation and large numbers of newsgroups appeared touting pornography and hacked software. However, this did not detract from the legitimate newsgroups that saw many people share ideas and a number of small businesses open doors to sales all around the globe (Gross, 1987, p. 5). It was the sense of kinship that saw Newsgroups dominate this first sense of internet community until around 1980 when the World Wide Web was formed (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p. 21).

With the introduction of the World Wide Web ("WWW") and its first browser lynx, this first browser being purely text based with the ability to follow hyperlinks, users became able to navigate large amounts of information by following predetermined hyperlinks. These hyperlinks - also known as a URL, the name for the code behind the text that we click on in a website document - where coded within the document text and allowed document writer to break up information that may have spanned many screens into linked documents of many pages. With a URL embedded on the page the user could now click on the defined link within a text document to the next page resulting in documents being reduced to screen size lengths for each readable section. This gave the user control to choose which page to view and in what sequence vastly speeding up finding relevant information. Further, these WWW documents could link to other documents without the need to scroll through pages and pages of newsgroup messages before getting to what the reader was looking for (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, pp. 21-22). The result was an even faster growing community where publishers of information could direct users to predefined schemas of information. This the web became open to publishers controlling the flow information by preventing the reader from being dragged off into another topic or including pages with advertising statements.

This text based browser reality quickly gave rise to the need for a way to show images, and in 1993, following Sir Tim Berners-Lee's browser developed in 1989 (Bloomberg.com), Marc Andreessen released Mosaic, later to be known as Netscape, the world's first popular graphical Web browser (BloombergTV, 2012). This was to be the beginning of the new social arena. The World Wide Web opened the door to Internet sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which allowed a new form of personal interaction. The ability to make off the cuff statements about anything that takes a users fancy gave rise to organisations, businesses and individuals being talked about in professional as well as flippant ways (Schneider, Jackson, & Baum, 2010). This single communication breakthrough of anonymity mixed with real time publication resulted in private communications between business and client being placed in the public arena of the Web. Unlike traditional news broadcasts, these statements are no longer localised to your hometown. Bad customer experiences, political views and legal argument are now placed on the world stage for everyone to see. Today a quick post made from any handheld or pc device on twitter, a blog, a forum or on facebook, can quickly is open the doors to customer segregation and lost business.

Yet many business leaders still use the internet purely for marketing a basic company website as if the Internet is a glorified billboard for them to post the corporate brochure. This results in a loss of community and sees customers ignoring many companies as they envision they are being ignored. To avoid this, the sense of community, started in the early days of FidoNet, needs to be incorporated into today's internet strategies through social network integration.

I believe that Stibel (2009) has a valid argument towards the internet being a brain due to limitless expanse of sharing ideas through Content Management Systems ("CMS"). The interconnections of pages like facebook, digg, twitter etc., all CMS pages, feed off each other through page delivery applications and result in limitless growth and interwoven connections all folded onto each other just like the brain. In this next section, I will explore Stibels (2009) idea.

The Internet Brain

It has been speculated that the internet is a brain (Stibel, 2009, p. 326), a concept I find rather intriguing and tend to lean towards supporting. This is not to say that I agree whole-heartedly with every premise made by Stible, but when I look at the cognitive patterns that people use to communicate it is impossible to ignore the same cognitive patterns on the internet. Let me explain. As human beings, we use a range of cognitive associations to form meaning from abstract thought. This abstract thought association is developed from associations built up trough experience and teaching (Kukla, 2000, p. 16). Through repetition of imagery, text, and the images or texts location, human beings can be lead to make patterns towards particular thought decisions and persuaded to think along defined parameters, known as schema, decided by the originator of the communication (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998, p. 53; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Willingham, 2007, pp. 144-152). We then take these predefined schema and associate our communicated responses based on how close the senders information correlates to the schema (Willingham, 2007, pp. 144-152).

The Internet reacts in a similar process through the predefined search patterns created by algorithms developed by search engine and social networking providers. These algorithms, incorporated into WebCrawler's, set the content, interlinking (connections to other websites with similar relevant content), and relevance through ranking, of websites searched by the users query (Stibel, 2009, p. 877). The WebCrawler does this by checking links, images, text and relevance of links against the WebCrawler's predefined parameters using linguistics as the base line (Stibel, 2009, pp. 990-992). This results in the Internet trading information based on how a person would perceive the same data and, although not sentient thought, it produces a similar result as that of the human brain creating an idea. In CMS systems, the connection is more deliberate as providers, developers and crawlers connect relevant information and deliver the exact page, with all its content and code, into the social networks defined page via a framed page. A framed page is a piece of web coding that allows a site to connect to another site by pulling the information in without the user ever leaving, or seeing the URL, to the framed site.

But, why is this significant? Think of every search you have ever made on Google. How many sites were provided that proved to be of no value or relevance to what you actually wanted? Did it stop you searching? Did you stop using that search provider? I bet the answer is No. Why? Because we recognise the internet as fallible. We know it cannot be 100% correct every time as most search queries we initiate are done at a time when even we are not sure of what we are looking for. In addition, despite this irrelevant information creeping into your search, did some of the relevant information create a new idea that you ended up using? I bet this answer is sometimes. This is due to the fallibility of the mind and is what drives human cognition. Our crumpled brains search schema for relevant matches, not necessarily logical ones, which sometimes connect us to new ideas. This search engine fallibility sometimes creates the same result.

In social networks the fallibility principle is reduced due to providers having a greater control over content than a web crawlers algorithm. However, social networks still provide fallibility when understanding our mood and thus cannot provide 100% reliability in our game or friend choices. The result sometimes opens the door to new and strong friendships with unlikely pairing and is what a leader needs to consider when looking at its customer or team. How can a leader expect teams to form reliable partnerships of unknowns if they have not been given an environment to openly share without expectation or reprisal?

Zander (2000) proposes this idea with his argument of providing an A to students for an assignment. In his argument the removal of expectation, while it took some time to get used too, provided a level of empowerment to students that saw them soar to new heights. I propose that the social network and gaming environment provides leaders with the same ability without the need for expensive rewards. In the next section, I will discuss some of the power these communities have and then move to the advantages this technology holds for business.

Enter the Internet community

Social networks such as twitter, facebook and linkdin provide outlets to help customers understand the business world better. Here organisations can strut their proverbial stuff and help train customers to ask the right questions. Authorised staff can interact with customers and the resultant communications can be used as a reference for future customers with similar questions. With real-time posting via handheld internet enabled devices, staff and customers alike can follow business ideas and support queries wherever they are resulting in faster turnaround. Further, business leaders can use the information to shape future customer support queries through strategies to train staff based on customer feedback. In turn, customers can see the business being proactive about issues and complaints, which helps to build respect and trust in the business and drive future sales (Borgan, 2012, pp. 9-14).

However, it also has its down side and a leader must approach these environments with some caution as the days when organisations found the complaints on the bathroom wall or discovered who was due to be fired from the rumours around the water cooler are gone (Neuhauser, Bender, & Stromberg, 2000, pp. 1-2). Today's business customer and staff member is highly techno savvy and fast to report a problem and slow to report a like. Further, untrue rumours can do as much damage as true ones.

This was seen on January 16 2012 where Rupert Murdock, owner of News Corp, started a twitter rumour that Google "streams movies free and sells [adverts] around them" (BBC, 2012). Rupert Murdock's rumour started a chain reaction within the United States congress and saw the birth of SOPA, the Stop Online Piracy Act. While the Act has yet to pass into law a frenzy of argument has begun from this single tweet. This is the power of the Internet community and leaders will do well to keep their teams empowered through a feeling of interconnectedness. I suggest that this can be achieved through the online gaming environment.

For a moment, let's turn our attention to a business's mission statement. As I discussed above, the internet also has the power to educate using the same portals of twitter and facebook. Using these networks, organisations can open customers and employees to a deeper understanding of the organisational culture. Why is this important? Think of the last organisation you worked for as an employee. When I say employee I mean a ground floor employee, no disrespect to the men and women who work hard at this level, doing all the work the CEO's, managers and leaders do not do. What were your perceptions of the organisation you worked for? Did the employees and customers share these assumptions or did employees behave in different ways than usual when managers or customers where around? Most people I ask this question always reply with the same answer: "Well, when the boss is away the mice will play". This standardised response has been seen in all sizes of organisations from IBM to the corner dairy (Neuhauser, Bender, & Stromberg, 2000, pp. 4-6).

Why is this? I suspect that much of it stems from a lack of deep core values, wishy washy mission stamens that have been reiterated and followed by management level since the organisation began. This lack of core value creates a disjointed connection to the business and can cause great harm. Yet where clear positive core values exist a business generates positive results from the sense of loyalty it commands. Just look at companies like 3M. They set clear and concise corporate values. They told the staff to live them each day and the leadership did the same. This included everyone, from the top management to the night janitor; and was portrayed in actions not just the words (Collins, 2000). When leaders are seen to hold dear to the core values, and follow them, everyone is inspired to do the same (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 171).

In social networks, the rule still applies as customers and staff will see the organisations values based on its responses and statements within this environment. Therefore, online leadership is about living the core values in the way we act and the statements made. This has to be created in staff members through environments that encourage the exercising of the core values. In this next section, I will discuss the issues associated with the textual nature of social networks and outline how online gaming can help to resolve some of these issues.

The misunderstood lines of communication

Arguably, social networks makes integration with core values more difficult due to the communication being separated in the form of online statements, as seen on twitter and facebook. Further, these non-verbal communication environments provide a minefield for leaders to navigate. Powerful emotive words such as *disappointed, unsatisfactory* and *inadequate* in face to face communication can be softened by a smile or comforting gesture. Online communication, however, is devoid of such interaction and must be dealt with by carefully chosen words (Robbins, Judge, Odendaal, & Roodt, 2009, p. 333).

Robins, et al. (2009) outline that leaders need to pay particular attention to the emotive context of the words chosen in response. Yet, just using non-emotive words are not the end of the story. Social knowledge plays just an important role in choosing the right response.

Language, geþéode, latina

Further, cultural misunderstandings often result from multiple emotional connected meanings of the same word, text or symbol. As an example, American troops entering Iraq, in the early days of the conflict, misunderstood children lining the streets with a thumbs up gesture as positive reinforcement of their arrival. Little did they know that the gesture in Iraq actually meant the same as the American middle finger gesture (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012, p. 267). As with non-verbal queues, multiple interpretations exist with textual layout and choice of word in context. Each word logically interconnects to the preceding word to form the linguistic cues we rely on for interpretation.

In our brain, we use our experience, training and education to develop meaning. Notably, this meaning is subject to our prejudices and most recent interactions with the world at large (Stewart, 2008, pp. 66-68). But as we discussed before, the brain connects our reasoning from patterns established through our experiences, culture and understanding of our social environment (Kukla, 2000; Stewart, 2008; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012) and can be developed through repetition and time (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998). Accordingly, as with the American solders above, the cues received may not connect clearly with the meaning behind the action, text or verbal statement. As a result, leaders need to develop environments and systems of delivery where clear understanding is provided to teams regardless of their cultural background. This is likely to require deep research onto each staff member's cultural upbringing experiences at considerable cost.

I suggest that these costs can be reduced and actions to words can be clarified through interaction with the organisations core values. Leaders must therefore, take a proactive role in educating staff as to the meaning of these core values through hands on interaction of living them. As leaders live by example clarity is provided to staff through experiences from linguistic meaning resulting in the mind developing schema to draw upon. This schema then provides a business with greater possibility of staff following the organisations ideology and passing it onto customers.

But how does a leader provide schemas for these core values without costly research into every staff member's background and ideology or the expense of travelling to locations to train them over lengthy periods? Further, how does the leader connect staff with multicultural communications on a global level without investing substantial cost into education in the field of communications? Do we all need PhD's in communication to have successful business in today's internet market? Can we truly build teams with this new world of understanding while still hiring school leavers? I believe the PhD's are not required for success in this new frontier and that school leavers can still be hired without huge learning costs. I suggest they can all achieve understanding of the core values through the world of online gaming.

Entering the world of Online Gaming

As I have discussed above the world of Internet social networks provides a minefield for the young player. It sets out a set of rules that business has not had to consider in the traditional forms of brick and mortar retail. The ability of social networks to create reciprocity, animosity and destruction to the corporate is as powerful as its ability to create good will. In the world of the Internet, a company is no longer the sum of its leadership but the sum of its entire employee base. One bad experience with an employee can have ripple effects to every employee and beyond, through the ripple effect of Public Relations (Harper, 2005, p. 41).

Leaders must therefore, look to stimulating environments to train employees on handling public relation matters without each employee undertaking a PR course. Traditionally, leadership has sought to do this through team building exercises and customer relationship training. However, in my 20 years experience, while these have provided some benefits, ultimately the employees return to the same position as before they began within a few months due to a lack of true connection with the organisations core values. So I asked myself, why? Why did employees lose the training that was provided to them? My answer was simple, although as yet not fully tested. I believe it is because the traditional forms of training bring with it an expectation of success. Let me explain.

In traditional forms of training the employee, or student, has an expectation of success. Therefore, they study the rules so that they can get an A. This does not provide for the information to stick or even that the teachings are being accepted by the student. All it does is show that the student has done the course and succeeded based on nothing more than the predefined set of rules set down by the leadership of the organisation or educator. Further, we value this participation by rewarding the participant into better job positions or trinket certificates that mean nothing to anyone outside the organisation. The business has no greater knowledge that the person believes in the values taught or that they will follow these values, than when the employee/student started the course. Then, to make sure we have subjugated the individual into accepting the situation, we argue that the rule must be followed or else. Leaving the business leadership to ponder, have we succeeded in improving the situation, or have we simply dominated an employee into submission to later rear its arguments on a social network? In my experience, the result has always been one of domination resulting in loss of creativity and customer problem solving. As I have discussed, this can build into a storm that reduces sales and may ultimately topple a business in today's social networked environments.

So what, I hear your mind resounding, business school teaches us that staff will come and go and as long as we keep making new sales we will be ok. Despite that, not all customer problems can be solved anyway, so why does it matter, people will come because we have a great product? IBM thought this as well and quickly discovered that customers who felt their problems go unresolved resulted in less than half of them repurchasing. IBM learnt that repeat business was more important than new sales when they saw the losses translate into a financial loss of $500 Million US dollars over five years (Barlow & Moller, 2008, p. 43). In small business, the loss of customers can mean the difference between paying bills at the end of the month or closing up shop. So why do organisations repeat the same methodology?

I argue, that it is often due to the social constructs that we should follow traditional models because that's what every other organisation does. Alternatively, we make the call that IBM does it so we should too as we want to be as big as IBM one day. But, is it a recipe for success or disaster? I suggest that it is the latter. This is because the new frontier provides little room for the entrenched ideology of traditional business. What worked in 1980 no longer applies in today's fast paced open communication environment. Traditional business was based on localised locations, say your local city, where people used your service and if they got disgruntled, they went somewhere else and only a handful got to hear about it. Usually close friends and family as the customer proceeded on a rant and rave about the bad experience. This rule no longer applies as the disgruntled customer now tweets it to the entire world. Suddenly that one customer has now become a mob of disgruntled potential customers and, as the internet is forever, the black stain never washes out. To prevent this leadership rallies around and hires PR geniuses to scrub at the stain hoping to at least fade the stain if it cannot be removed, at the cost of millions each year. I think there is a better way.

Enter the Transformational Leader

To begin answering my statement of a better way, let's look at the basis of transformation leadership. This will help us to understand why transformational leaders provide the best results in this online environment. I suggest that the transformational leadership style needs to be present in all individuals dealing with customers, as they will be the ones to bring creative resolution to problems using the organisations core values and reducing costs through customer empowerment. Then I will discuss how Internet Gaming platforms provide the strongest platform for the development of transformational leaders.

There are various ways for organisations to try to train employees to become transformational leaders. Transformational leadership teaches us to empower others to lead themselves (Northouse, 2007, p. 190). This is achieved through a focus on modelling the way and encouraging people to act (Kouzes & Pozner, 2007, pp. 41-50). To do this the transformational leader has to help the employee to find their voice (Kouzes & Pozner, 2007, p. 50). What Kouzes & Pozner mean by this, is to know who you are. To do this they argue that the leader must go within to find what really makes him or her tick. They suggest to start with a clear identification of what the leader values then build on it (Kouzes & Pozner, 2007, p. 50). Accordingly, the current organisational leaders need to develop core value statements within the organisation. Once developed these core values should shape the team building exercise. This is important because the core values are what drive the organisation towards success. Customers and employees alike both connect with an organisation because they believe in it and trust it. When core values of the business do not match well with the core values of the leader or employee, and worse are not followed, the result is tension and generally a breakdown in trust and respect in the organisations (Ringland, Sparrow, & Lustig, 2010, p. Ch 10). This leads both employees and customers to begin questioning their identity and role with the organisation. The result is a lack of connection with the organisation and ends in high staff turnover and lost accounts.

This is why it is important at the outset for the organisation to choose real and valid core values. These core values cannot be arbitrary or based on another organisation. They have to be true to you. No one can tell you what your core value should be. They cannot guide you to the perfect core value

nor can they quick stamp an ideology onto your forehead and say *that's, it you now have a core value.* Anyone saying otherwise is trying to sell you something.

Your core value is your personal belief. It is as individual as your likes and dislikes and you should take your time to find them. To start think about what matters to you most? What gets you up in the morning and what makes you feel the best. For me it is putting people first. I find it impossible to put myself before someone else, which has often seen me not charge for services because of the charitable nature this creates. My commitment to this value has resulted in the creation of strong customer support systems, which see clients returning for more services as they know that their issue will be resolved no matter what resources have to be used to find said resolution. It also creates loyalty because the customer knows I will work for them and not the profit. I care about their needs and always state that "if the job is done the money will take care of itself". So far this has not steered me wrong.

Another of my core values is to treat everyone as an equal despite the knowledge and ability they may have. I do this because my knowledge and experience is learned. How can I say that no one else can have my ability if they were provided the same education and experience? I cannot and so choose not to place myself above anyone else. This core value has seen my team and I, educate everyone entering our offices and has resulted in much stronger relationships. These are just two core values that guide my organisation. They in turn have lead to the creation of a new international entity with like-minded colleagues and rapid growth. You must choose the values that connect your organisation to your belief. If you are an employee of an organisation and find that you are unable to connect your beliefs with that of the organisation, it maybe time to think about a change. I say this not for you to quit, but to think carefully on your direction and how you see things working out in five years. In order to truly lead as a transformational leader, you must first be true to yourself. To do otherwise would be to lead a lie and this will only foster distrust in followers.

Once you have set your core values you are now ready to develop the team. At this juncture, it is prudent to note that not all employees you choose to develop skills around your core values will be willing to stay, or choose to change and adapt with your organisation. This is ok and a normal part of the process. Those who do stay will be strong and loyal employees with enhanced abilities for teamwork and creative problem solving. This is what you need to grow your business in this online environment.

Once your team is created you can begin training them in creative problem solving and empowerment of customers. In this next section I will discuss how the online gaming environment provides the best way to do this.

The introduction of the Gaming Environment

You may have heard of the term Gamification banded around in the corporate environment as a license to print money. Through the online environment, people will spend ridiculous amounts of real money on virtual items that can only be used inside the virtual world. However, Gamification theory defines Gamification as: *the process of using game thinking and mechanics to engage audiences and solve problems* (Zichermann, 2010). While companies are scrambling to use this in an external sense to make financial profit, I suggest that this process can be turned within to develop

strong teams and enhanced leaders. In this next chapter, I will discuss how the benefit of turning Gamification inwards, and the returns this creates for leadership and customer retention.

At a certain age, human beings are socially conditioned to accept play as being inappropriate. This is widely because detractors, organisations focused on work productivity, consider play to be unproductive and a waste of time (Brown 2009, cited in Kark, 2011, p. 507). Yet successful business's can be found where play has been adopted at the heart of organisational culture and part of the core value. Just look at Google with its mountains of beanbags and play areas (Scott, 2008, p. 48). Play is unique in its ability to bring people together that would normally shy away from each other. It has the ability to develop friendships and teams where traditional models of thinking argue that people are unsuited for working together (Kark, 2011, p. 510). These teams often then resolve problems through a windy path that created creative resolutions that are difficult to see under ends orientation (Kark, 2011, pp. 511-512; DeKanter, 2004, p. 28). I, therefore, argue that gaming environments, such as online games, provide a unique opportunity for businesses to develop strong teams that enhance businesses internally and externally through innovation, creativity and problem resolution.

Through the online gaming environment, commonly known as MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online), takes team activities to a more interactive level. The environment creates a boundless world, simulated in any dreamscape that is designed around your team's passions or business values. In my case, my team loves science fiction so we choose environments that are space simulations and connect with our core values of people first profit second (for example Startrek Online). In the chosen environment, the team is dropped into scenarios with problems to solve and a team leader coordinates the activities, staff, and goals; more on this later where I will use an example I developed for use in this paper to show how it works. The MMO environment provides twists and turns due to the dynamic allocation of content. There is no one way to solve the problem and teams have to work together to achieve the goal. The result is a complete breakdown of mental blockages towards failure as the mental processes associated with play increase acceptance of the problem. This acceptance results in interactive learning to everyone involved (DeKanter, 2004, pp. 27-28) that turns leaders into students and students into leaders through their engagement to solve the problem. While we did not open the play to outsiders there is no reason not too as opening the environment to customers can link them to staff creating strong friendships and loyalties through play. However, I would recommend training the staff first before letting them loose on the unsuspecting public.

This concept is not new. The military have been using gaming to train personal since the Stone Age (Smith R. , 2010, p. 7) which they called simulation. Despite the name, simulation or game, with the advent of the personal computer, these simulations have simply taken on a personal role where military training has combined with personal entertainment (Smith R. , 2010). Games such as Battlefield 3 (EA), World of Tanks (War Gaming.net and bigWorld) and Left 4 Dead (Steam) all encourage teamwork for the resolution of problems through combat. Battlefield 3 is the most notable environment for this through its scenarios where the squad needs to gain conquest over points marked within the map. The first team to gain 50% of the marked points is rewarded through the other team losing tickets, the games equivalent of points. When these tickets are reduced to zero the winning team wins bonuses and the scenario ends.

In another unique scenario, players are required to work as a team to take security consoles. Each squad works to protect other team members from being shot as they take the security console out (destroy it). The first to take two consoles is rewarded with advancement deeper into enemy territory until the final consoles are destroyed at the enemy base. Rewards are provided purely in game through ranks (from ensign to Gold Star General) and the unlocking of better weaponry. This keeps players returning night after night to fight it out in an endless world war.

The advantage of these environments is the ability of leaders to use them right out of the box. The environments create a perfect area for placing members into a safe space where they can test their skills to lead or to find answers to get the job done. As players are pitted against real people, the solutions are never straightforward. As in life, you must outthink the enemy and get the job done. This opens the door to players working together for a common goal and produces teamwork both inside the game as well as outside.

These environments provide a way for leaders to build on the organisations core values. By focusing the members on working together, the members must act to support each other to achieve the goal. In each action, different leaders emerge to support the others based on an idea conceived in real-time to resolve the current conflict. In this way, leaders come and go with the team acting as one cohesive unit. Let me now move onto discussing how this works and how I have seen it in action over the past few months in my test environment.

Gaming example

In November 2011, I walked into see David Mackie, my professor at Waikato University, and discussed with him the concept of using gaming as a means to help train leaders. Having just completed a masters paper with David on leadership I was hot on the concept that this new environment could help enhance the leadership of many business in the new economy. David looked at me and smiled as though he had been waiting for years for someone to finally pickup on this idea. After a brief discussion David handed me an article written by him in August 1996 for *Media International Australia* and our discussion started to heat up in excitement. After explaining my hypothesis David suggested I make the idea part of my masters degree and test the theory to see if it is viable for a full blown research project. Thus this paper was born.

After leaving David's office, I got on the phone to my uplink providers and ordered a number of games that could be used to provide a basic test environment. I chose for the purposes of the experiment three well-known games from different genres, Battlefield 3, Startrek Online, and Left4 dead2. I chose these three games specifically because of the scenarios they produced.

Disclaimer

It is important to note at this time, that this was a test environment to see if the paper had validity for a full study. Accordingly, no formal or exact methodology will be discussed in this paper despite it being mentioned. The purpose of this test is to find the right approach to testing the validity of the hypothesis and to see if the environment can generate enough participants to make for a good study. If it succeeds a full blown study will be undertaken with action research at a later date.

The Test Environment

To begin I setup a guild, the internet equivalent of a chess club, website for players to be able to communicate with each other and see what I was doing. Next I created player accounts in the three game environments and rolled -- the name given to the creation of characters which comes from the environment of Dungeons and Dragons, where players had to roll a dice for each character attribute such as strength, agility etc. -- a single character for each game. Through previous online connections, a list of appropriate gamers where chosen to participate in the guild from a list of 50 players. A total of 30 members were chosen from three separate time zones, Canada, The United States and Australia/New Zealand. This was done to keep the test manageable within the timeframe and to allow for some downtime caused by a players real life. In addition, five top-level players were invited to join the management team to coordinate game time due to the varied time zones.

In the beginning, three games where chosen as the lab environment, Star Wars Online, Startrek Online and Battlefield 3. The games where chosen due to their unique differences in play style and problems to solve. Here I will outline each games environment:

> *Startrek Online* provided a unique space environment where players had to solve simple problems through teamwork and diplomatic solutions with the enemy. Each story based test required players to choose options to try and resolve the hostile situation. There were a number of choices and no single answer would produce the same result. The questions were designed by the game developers to have four possible solutions creating a perfect environment to test leadership skills.

> *Star Wars Online* provided a similar backdrop to that of Startrek Online. However, in Star Wars Online a player could choose a light or dark path, which each quest producing different results based on the choices made. If a player chose a dark path, but initiated light choices, the game play substantially changed. Further, where team members chose dark choices on the dark path their choices could be influenced by the light choices made by other team members without disrupting the player's entire storyline. This provided a suitable test environment for testing leadership direction where a player refused to follow the leader's decisions.

> *Battlefield 3* provided a standard shooting war environment that required players to work as a team to obtain an objective. Like any war scenario, players where pitted against each other to gain ground through the elimination of other teams or squads. This gave a standard baseline test for leadership styles in an all out win/lose environment.

Players were all told that I was writing this paper and that the results of the environment where to be used within. However, they were not told how the test would be conducted or how the results would be collated. They all agreed and were happy to proceed, as they were all anonymous to the paper and other members of the guild. Only I had the details of who they were in real life. This provided a clean set of test results un-tarnished by the possibility of false positives through the member knowing the test in advance.

As I was the person that brought them together, members looked to me to lead each environment. This resulted in some long hours into the early morning light coordinating and running gaming events. On average, I was spending close to 16 hours a day running the games during the varied time zones. This got me into a few arguments with family to say the least due to the long hours and lack of sleep. Despite this, the results proved more than worthwhile and became much more than proving leadership skills under the environment. As users became more familiar with each other, a number of miraculous human phenomenons began to emerge, as I will discuss shortly.

Each user was provided access to Ventrilo, voice over IP software, which linked each user in real-time voice chat. This provided a closer connection between players than the in-game text environment and prevented players being killed due them trying to text "watch out" when enemy soldiers where on top of their location. The purpose of this was to prevent frustration caused through the gaming environment and clouding results. Players began with a choice of being all in one ventrilo chat room or spreading out into other provided chat areas. Players made the choice to remain all within the same chat room as they found this to be more fun and interactive. As players where all in one chat room players had to work out coded ways to tell other team members what they wanted them to know. Strangely enough, after the first month the coded conversations gave way to speed with players becoming unconcerned with giving away team location.

Upon login to the Ventrilo room, players where provided details of the day's game and asked to choose the map scenarios they would like to play. Once chosen the server was spun up and players randomly assigned to teams. The need for randomisation in the team selection was to allow for new leaders to emerge and old leaders to follow. This fosters a set of mutual goals where everyone gets an opportunity to become a leader to achieve the common purpose. Hackman and Johnson (2009) discuss how this purpose leads groups to focusing their efforts as one to achieve the common goal. For them, the groups interactions towards this single-minded effort opens the individual up to greater interpersonal communication through regular expression and discussions with other members. This in turn, they argue, develops stronger relationships and closer bonds that see the group foster greater collaboration (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, pp. 200-203).

The potential here is for businesses of all sizes to develop strong coordinated groups focused on the goal of the company. However, in my opinion, this will not be fully successful unless the employees have the same core values as the leaders and owners of the business as I discuss above. David Williams and Mary Michelle Scott (2012) discuss their experiences and how hiring employees with similar core values, has helped grow their company and reduced staff turnover. Peter Choan (2003) suggests that hiring employees with similar core values increases productivity and customer service as the employee is happier (Cohan, 2003, p. 61). I agree. When testing the teams I found that those with similar core values worked twice as hard to achieve the same goal, stayed online longer to achieve it, and had more fun. In fact, in one case I had to disconnect a user and send him to bed after he had spent a week of 36-hour days to help the team. The person was exhausted and almost failed a paper at his university. At the time, he cursed me up and down for removing him from the team. Later he saw the wisdom of what I said as it prevented a repeat of his term paper. This is the loyalty that this environment can create with proper management.

The connection of core values provides a powerful motivation and loyalty that I have not witnessed in any other team formation based on traditional methods of team building that relies on putting members together based on little more than the location within a department and skill sets (Dyer, Dyer, Dyer, & Edgar, 2007, p. ch 3). For me, this location and skill sets approach serves only to develop egos and foster limited success based around specific problems. If a business truly wants to develop long lasting relationships and business success then to my mind the core values and not the goal, must be the focus of developing the team. All we have to do is look at Google, Amazon.com and 3M as shining examples of companies that lead the way in this idea.

Now I realise that in the back of your minds you will be wondering how the team can be created around these core values if I am choosing them at random. Here's where the first phenomenon of human interaction begins which I will now discuss in the results.

Results

As I discussed above a number of human phenomenons began to show when this test was run.

Phenomenon one: The evolving leader

At first teams were chosen at random with no initial core values set. Teams where simply dropped into a random number generator and pulled out as listed. Following this, a team leader was chosen at random by the team. However, as time progressed the teams seemed to ignore the formality of choosing a team leader and simply let one evolve as required by the situation. For example, if a team were losing due to a strategy, or a leader becoming tired, a new leader would emerge to bring the team back to victory. I often witnessed a team that was leading at the beginning fall prey to an emergent leader that took the losing team to victory after being more than half the required points behind.

This evolution of the team leader showed the human spirits ability to treat everyone as equal and that no specific person needed to lead all the time. Further, there was never any question of power play where one person had to have rule as every team member was happy to follow any team leader provided that mistakes where learned from. No one cared if they won or lost as long as the leader had done their best and shared the wisdom.

This form of open leadership focused on relationships and passion brought the team together to work more creatively to resolve problems. It saw the removal of competitiveness within the team and refocused it on the opposition. It saw them focus their emotions towards the goal and not on blame. It saw emotions and anger channelled into resolution of the situation and not punishment of any person or team member, including not attacking the opposing team causing the frustration.

This was the first phenomenon. A social group not bent on reciprocity but resolution. This is what leadership is about for me. Creating an environment where teams work for the betterment of humankind not punishment and blame of mistakes. This is not to say that all situations were peaceful. At time, although few, I had to intervene to bring two parties aside and discuss the level of frustration they were exhibiting verbally.

After a discussion with them, they started to understand that the frustration was with the situation and not caused by the individual player and attacking them was inappropriate. The mental constructs of social norms towards blame began to break down and they began to blossom with an understanding of mutual investment towards equality and resolution.

What was most amazing was the speed at which it developed. After only one conversation regarding the incident, the frustrated member dropped the social norm and implemented the change to focus on the issue not the person resulting in less frustration and more creative problem solving. These same members, a few months later, discussed how they had taken this knowledge with them into their workplace and how it had changed the work situation to the point where one gained a promotion. The resulting change in core value has seen these teams achieve greater prosperity in personal and work life.

Phenomenon two: Shifting core values

Time and time again, I have read that to move someone's core values takes arduous hours and results in a lot of frustration. In the gaming environment, the time is relative and core values move without stress.

As we saw above, core values shifted with relative speed. I saw more and more of the members working closer and closer together in a tighter unit regardless of the team randomisation. They had all begun to become firm friends and relished the chance to work together or against each other. This led me to look into what the core values now were. To my mind, they must have shifted due conflicts disappearing and the lack of associated blame when a team lost. When players where asked about what they now valued, I began to notice a pattern of core values emerging that was across the entire player population. This was decidedly different from the values they had produced when first asked.

It appears to me that, as the teams begin to work more and more together, and remember this study has only been running for four months, on the same goals orientation, and without the blame game, they become closer and the core values begin to align. Holtgraves and Kashima (2008) explain how repetition and pier standing influences our perceptions resulting in us developing ideologies that match those we respect (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008, pp. 74-84). Further, through continued interaction with environments individuals can develop a level of respect that increases the mental pathways to the accepted *schema* and results in our values gaining integration and acceptance. Where the level of respect is greatest, or the person has tested the value and had success (gaining a reward such as promotion in my example above), this creates stronger connections to the *schema* and results in the person adopting the value as their own (Barnes & Bloor, 1982, p. 33; Willingham, 2007, pp. 144-152). The result is a person who may have begun with different core values, developing core values that align with the organisation.

These results confirm the need for further study and show that every business may be able to benefit from the gaming environment. This is because old business models can be redeveloped and change can be implemented over time at low cost and low resistance through online gaming. Further,

distinct cultural issues can be resolved through this open communication environment, which I will discuss as phenomenon three.

Phenomenon three: cultural dimensions

One of the biggest issues with business today is the face of the internet. With more and more businesses placing their lives in the hands of chatter on facebook and twitter cultural dissonance has become common place. Public relations managers and marketing gurus have been employed by many businesses to resolve the issues of cultural misunderstandings resulting in large PR bills (Amant, 2002).

Personally, I think many of these issues can be resolved through the business gaining a better understanding of the cultural environment they are working with. If a business takes the time to understand the people of the culture, and the people learn the values of the company, through interaction then both parties will have less problems in the future. This is where the gaming environment can help. The game environment can be periodically opened to the public allowing complete strangers to login from anywhere in the world. Specific cultures can be targeted or a worldwide audience can be allowed to interact with employees on the front line of customer relations. This opens the door to interaction with the culture, which allows the company to learn how ideas will be received. How the culture interacts with frustration, and how resolution can be created all via anonymity.

In my research, the gaming environment was open to the world. We have people from all manner of cultures and time zones spanning from Europe to Asia Pacific. I have language barriers from Germany and China and culture shocks from the UK to Israel. Yet the environment opened the lines of communication where strangers became friends and culture classes became points of discussion. Never, in my 20 years, have I seen any environment have the ability to open the doors of understanding that I have seen in the virtual world of gaming. This virtual environment has the potential to bring people to a shared understanding and collaboration that is difficult in the world of masks and social controls that exist outside.

With employees adopting the core values and the shared ideals that the online gaming environment creates these emergent leaders now become the PR gurus of the organisation. They can take these new-found skills into the online environment and invite customers to join while practicing these values. Outside players that I saw enter this environment became intoxicated with the way people where engaging and the sharing of these values which saw them return night after night. While this was not tested for, it shows further study is needed.

Phenomenon four: it grows because it is free

The success of online gaming must be partly attributed to the ability for strangers to login and play. The open lines of communication that are often closed in normal world communications are not subject to the same rules of the gaming environment. There is no banning due to race, education or poverty line. If you can login you can play. Only a complete disrespect towards players will see you kicked from a server or guild. The level of anonymity further creates openness of discussion without concern for reciprocity. It helps to remove directed attack and emotional argument, provided players

are warned to keep it academic and not emotionally directed. It provides a place to actively learn about others and to interact in honest ways.

Due to this, it grows on its own. When I started this project four months ago I started with around 30 people. As we began to learn about each other, our values, and our styles more and more people became interested in joining. Today, this test environment has grown to an online population of over 700 people worldwide and shows no signs of stopping. The ability to show, share, grow, and interchange ideas makes the environment attractive. For leadership this means a world of open communication that helps parties to grow internally as well as professionally.

Conclusion

From the early 1980s the internet was to take the communication world by storm. Its ability to transcend boarders, race, age and sex gave it a unique edge to bring people together, and despite the lack of graphics, the early internet via fidonet brought people together with the common aim of sharing their lives. Since then the sense of community has taken root in the form of social networks, blogs and online gaming. It has the power to build up or tear down with the release of a single sentence. Yet the world of the internet provides us with a range of opportunities to bring people together in a sense of shared pride and community like never before, and as I have discussed, this is ever more present in the world of online gaming.

Gone are the days of the internet being seen as an online brochure, its evolution has expanded it into a virtual community where the limits are set only by those who own the environment being visited. The advent of the MMO has now increased this into a world of true interaction and allowed a new set of tools to be released in the transformation of the human brain. This gaming or simulation environment allows individuals to explore and grow as human beings learning from each other in a safe environment. Further, it allows for misunderstandings to be resolved and core values to be aligned and brings strangers together to form strong friendships.

In this paper, I have discussed the benefit to business organisations and transformational leaders. I have outlined the need for society to have a common goal through shared values as this brings people together in miraculous ways. I argue that when the world of corporate identity merges with leadership the core values can spring humanity onto a springboard for success and open possibilities for spiritual transformation in every participant.

The online gaming world allows the transformational leader to design scenarios informally enticing the best out of participants and encouraging the heart to find comradeship through positive feedback. It also allows the leader to be transformed by followers and teach in the same ways that the human phenomenons, discussed above, bring players together. This is what transformational leadership is all about. The MMO environment brings the best out of people and can grow teams to hold such strength and connection better than any other theory I have tried.

In this fast paced, immediate role playing MMo environment, players and leaders must think outside the box to quickly solve problems, activating the creativity centres of the brain (Bytheway, 2007, pp. 86-90). This creativity then becomes infectious, and through toleration of mistakes, begins to build a community of trust and respect that fosters out into real world activity (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, pp. 101-109).

In my short time of running this environment I have seen people change and grow. They have strengthened as people, become more confident, gained promotions, been more willing to express themselves and argued for me to employ them. This level of loyalty, I believe, would have taken several years to secure. Yet in this MMO environment, that level has been obtained in only four months at 12 hours per week (one day).

This is the greatest benefit to a transformational leader. An environment where active learning can take place in a safe area that has no detriments to the outside world. A place where investment is inexpensive and results are quick. No other environment has shown the cost benefits and return that a MMO turned internally can provide. It success is based on its ability to encourage openness, honesty and loyalty through training without repercussion. it develops skills of the leader as much as the student or employee in ways that have never been seen in traditional teambuilding scenarios. For the transformational leader it provides a source of limitless environments to test every conceivable issue and help people become the best of who they are regardless of age.

Further, the greatest thing about the MMO environment is even small companies can do it. Why? Because there are literally hundreds of MMO games already online. All you have to do is pay, or use a free to play MMO, sign in your members and you have you own online training environment. Need specific environments? Then why not create your own on inexpensive platforms such as the Hero Engine designed for Star Wars online.

The world of MMO training is new and exciting and I am pleased to have been able to give you a small glimpse into an environment that builds leaders from ordinary people.

Future Study

Over the next few months it is my intention to extend this into a full blown study that incorporates social networking (including social network website, iphone and android apps written by me), gaming environments, and reward points to see how the leadership environment can be extended. I will be looking to test the validity of statements made in this paper on a wider audience to see if anomalies exist or if the system breaks down. Further, I will be testing to see if the environment saturates where the community grows, as suggested by Stibel (2009). It is my hypothesis that the community will not breakdown but that it will fracture whereby teams will grow to make their own teams, which will interact with the main team, and develop on their own merits. In this way, mini community teams will grow with a strong relationship to the main team in an ever-growing nexus of leadership that extends beyond the sum of its beginnings and opens the doors to creativity and further leadership growth (I have tried to represent this graphically below, "fg. 1").

fg. 1

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