



Case Study

Look Who's Talking:
Voice Chat & the Player Experience

By: Dana Massey

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Voice chat: Part of the game

Not long ago, voice chat was the domain of hardcore gamers. That is no longer the case. It has become a basic staple gamers expect in any online experience. People who once would never have imagined themselves in an online game, now take advantage of voice chat to not only enhance their gameplay experience, but to also build meaningful social bonds that extend well beyond their game of choice. Companies like Vivox that seamlessly integrate technology into games have made that possible.

As long as there have been online games, gamers have always wanted to talk to those they're playing with. At first, it took a LAN party or a good old fashioned telephone call. Later, third party solutions like Ventrilo, TeamSpeak and Skype arrived. While great for people who played with an established group or knew each other in real life, these kinds of solutions never scaled. It wasn't until games adopted fully integrated voice chat that the barriers between players were broken down for good.

Usability: Fun in Games

"[Ventrilo] was kind of a pain to use, because it wasn't actually in the game," said Christopher Simons, a 28 year old from Florida, better known as Erge, a Jedi in Sony Online Entertainment's (SOE) Star Wars Galaxies. "I had to go out of the game to login and everything. It seemed like a lot of work."

For years, Simons had been part of an online guild that used Ventrilo to coordinate their battles. That all changed when Vivox voice was introduced to the game. Now, all players at least have the ability to hear what's being said, and it's greatly improved his online experience.

He gave the example of Heroic Raids that his guild undertakes in SWG. Prior to Vivox, the organizers had to waste a lot of time getting people coordinated and into their Ventrilo server. It was a time consuming process that delayed his ability to simply play the game.

"In an encounter like [Hoth] there are so many different objectives you need to complete," he explained. "Groups need to split up and complete three to five different objectives in different areas."

With Vivox voice, staging the epic raids common to most MMOs is a much simpler process for the players, which gives them more time to focus on what really matters: having fun.

Getting to Know You

Michael Wells, a 28 year old from North Carolina agreed. Like Simons, the introduction of Vivox voice into his game of choice really enhanced the experience. Wells is a Paladin in SOE's original EverQuest and the leader of the Divine Reapers guild.

Wells has been playing EverQuest off and on for the better part of a decade and couldn't believe the change in his experience when Vivox was introduced to EverQuest in 2008.

"Not only did it help out the guild - it did a 180 on the guild - it turned the game around as well," said Wells. "It added a new more pleasant atmosphere. It definitely turned the game around."

As a guild leader, Wells had been struggling for years with declining membership in Divine Reapers. Players would join his guild under false pretenses to leach off items and levels, and then leave to join bigger guilds as soon as they'd achieved their target level. The practice had gotten so bad that Wells required people to talk to him in TeamSpeak before they could join, a practice that while necessary for him, prevented a lot of possibly good recruits from getting involved. According to him, the practice of alt farming had gotten so out of control that many good players left not just his guild, but the game.



Image: EverQuest II from Sony Online Entertainment

"When they came out with the Vivox voice feature, people had no more excuses at that point," he explained. Everyone had the technology at their fingertips and didn't need to download bulky and sometimes costly third party software to talk. It became easier to get to know prospective members, which almost completely neutralized the alt problem. What's more, it brought the guild as a whole closer together and made recruiting easier.



Social bonds are the fabric of online games, especially ones going on ten years old. There are newer and shinier MMOs out there, but for people like Wells, the game they fell in love with nearly a decade before remains their focus. Without community, he and his guild would have been long gone and integrated voice strengthens the social bonds that keep community influencers like him involved.

Ken Rendell, a 40 year old from Chicago, uses Vivox voice in EverQuest II. For him, a long time member of a large guild, the real benefit of integrated voice chat is how it allows him to work with those outside his regular social circle.

"You can coordinate things better in the group and it sure beats typing out everything," he said simply.

While many online gamers belong to large guilds like Rendell and Wells, third party solutions require a lot of setup and when someone just wants to get in and take off with a pickup group getting them into a third party voice service is usually not going to happen.

Vivox has made casual encounters a much more enjoyable experience for him. Now, a small group can just meet and strike up a conversation. There is no barrier to entry.

Accessing Worlds & Building Relationships

For many gamers, it's tough to get to know new players. Joining large guilds can be a time consuming and cumbersome process. Prior to voice chat, players in a pick-up group would likely never speak again. These games are big and with everyone focused on the encounter, there was often not much time for chat. With voice chat, pick-up group mates can evolve into more lasting and satisfying social experiences. Experiences that help people find an online group of their own, or even extend into the real world.

For Belle Loll, the avatar name of a 47 year old woman from Wisconsin, Vivox Voice did more than just enhance her online experience in Second Life.

Loll never imagined herself in an online world, let alone such an important part of one. It all began seven years ago. She frequented an online message board dedicated to CBS's Big Brother television reality show. There she found a group of about forty women with a common interest and when one day they heard rumors of Big Brother in Second Life, a few of them decided to give it a try.



Image: Second Life from Linden Lab

Fast forward seven years and now the group regularly exchanges telephone calls, Christmas cards and stories of their kids, but it wasn't until the introduction of Vivox's integrated voice chat that their relationship grew beyond that of a casual online community.

"It has drawn us into a really close knit group of friends," she said. "I don't think it would be the same [without voice]."

By no means the profile of the average gamer, Loll also believes voice has allowed more to get involved in Second Life. Online games can be difficult to learn, especially for people who – like Loll – are new to that kind of environment. With Vivox Voice, she and her friends are easily able to guide new friends through their first baby steps

into Second Life. Something, she freely admits, she wouldn't have the patience to do if all she had was just a keyboard at her disposal.

Not all Fun & Games – Voice Chat Means Business

What's really amazing about Loll is that while she began her adventures online as a fan of a reality TV show, today she serves as the Co-Event Chair of Relay For Life in Second Life, a group that raised \$215,000 for cancer research last year, and hopes to hit a quarter of a million in 2009.



Image: Second Life from Linden Lab

"Last year we had maybe 70 active teams. This year we have more than 125 active teams and over 2,000 team members," she said of the group. Like their real-world counterpart, Relay For Life in Second Life holds an actual run online. The group also sets up kiosks where players can donate money directly to the American Cancer Society right through the game.

The virtual run, says Loll, allows people from all over the world to get together, regardless of their geography. And a virtual event allows people stricken by the disease to run, when they might not otherwise be able to.

Loll got involved in the virtual Relay for Life prior to voice chat in Second Life, but its introduction has completely changed the level of coordination, which in turn has helped them raise more money. It has allowed her to get more involved and do more.

"I cannot even imagine Second Life without voice now," she says.

In Conclusion – Just the Beginning

For all these players, integrated voice chat has enhanced their experience in a range of ways. It makes playing the game easier and more fun, it strengthens the bonds of community that really keep people in a game over the long term, and helps them ease new players in their worlds.

These are the cornerstones of every online game. It's time for developers to break down the barriers to entry and make it easy for people to make real connections in their online worlds.

About the Author

Dana Massey has reported on the MMO genre for the last decade. During that time, he served as the editor of MMORPG.com, WarCry Network, and contributed to The Escapist, IGN PC, Massive Online Gamer and others. He was also the Co-Lead Game Designer of "Wish," an MMORPG developed by Mutable Realms.

About Vivox

Based in Natick, MA and founded in 2005, Vivox is the leading provider of community-building voice services for online games and virtual worlds. Supporting over 11 million users in more than 180 countries and delivering over 2 billion minutes of voice chat a month, the Vivox Network is the world's largest voice network for gamers. The Vivox voice chat solution is available on multiple platforms – PC, web based and for the PlayStation3® console. Vivox customers include online game and virtual world developers and publishers such as CCP Games, Icarus Studios, Linden Lab, NCsoft, Sony Online Entertainment and Wizards of the Coast. For more information on Vivox and the power of voice, visit www.vivox.com



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