



# Universities Paving Way For Online Gaming In US

By Bruce Bahlmann ■ *Birds-Eye Network Services*

Catering to the growing and evolving online gaming business is on many service providers' minds these days. In fact, the product roadmaps of the largest telecommunications operators all have online gaming squarely in their sights—they are just not quite there as far as implementing anything soon. Oddly enough, where US-based service providers are delaying entry into the online gaming business, universities as well as other overseas service providers are forging ahead. In this article we will review why online gaming is so attractive, explain how some universities are approaching online gaming, and suggest some things that service providers might want consider when they get serious about entering this business.

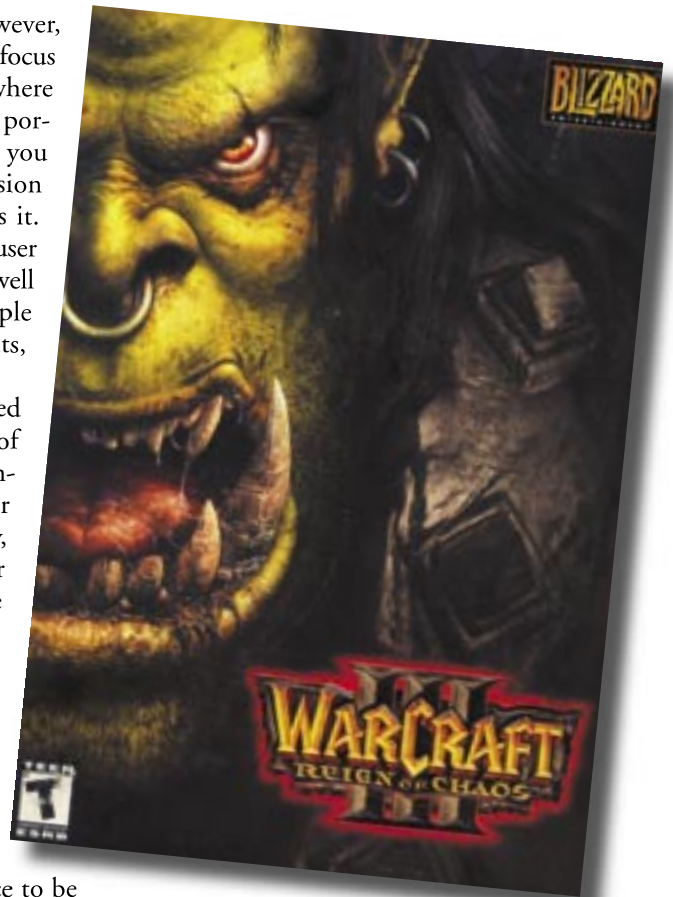
## Why all the interest in online gaming?

Besides the fact that multi-player online gaming (MPOG) is big business (10.3 billion in 2003), it has some particularly attractive ingrained stimulants that drive its continued use. Like nicotine, online gaming is very capable of manipulating and addicting its users. Online gaming provides the same thrills as real world gambling where stakes (rewards and consequences) are high and the action can be non-stop. During online gaming play, users often fall into a type of trance where the user becomes very close (both mentally and physically) with the game such that the edges of the screen no longer confine the users participation. Such experience is similar to television viewing or going to the movies in that when you first sit down you see the room

around the screen. However, as the movie begins your focus intensifies to the point where all you see is the moving portion of the picture and you no longer see the television frame or what surrounds it. As reality slips away, the user becomes subjected to as well as influenced by multiple types of media, stimulants, and opportunities.

Some of the time tested and proven elements of successful businesses include the potential for addiction, dependency, ultra convenience, or to cater to multiple age groups. If a business or technology can capture at least one of these, it has a good chance to be successful. Any business or technology that can capture more than one of these elements has an even better chance to be successful—online gaming addresses at least two of these elements.

There are three very interesting aspects of online gaming that influence users to keep playing games. These three areas include escapism, mastery, and lingua franca (for lack of a better word). Escapism is the ability of the game to envelop the player into a world of fantasy in the same way a dream takes you away from your life to some alternate reality. Fantasy plays an important role in games, especially as the graphics increasingly become life



like. Movies often have the same effect only they are less interactive. Mastery is the ability for the game to provide opportunities for its players to achieve success and other positive reinforcement. Most games start out fairly simple and become progressively harder in response to the players becoming more skilled. When games employ this type of graduated scale of difficulty, it encourages players to keep playing as achieving milestones within the game feeds and nurtures the player's desire to master the game. Fighting and

violence, while negative aspects of on-line games, also provide opportunity to demonstrate mastery of and therefore advancement within the game.

The subject of lingua franca (or com-

mon language) is a very important yet seldom discussed aspect of online gaming. Lingua franca is defined as “any of various languages used as common or commercial tongues among peoples of diverse speech.” Most online games have the ability to learn about the player, create a type of profile about the player, and then customize the gaming environment or experience in response to the player’s profile. However, some

of the most successful games go well beyond that and incorporate a type of common language into the game. What is a common language you might ask? Some examples of advanced use of the common language include Zodiac and Horoscope. The key to the followings of Zodiac and Horoscope is the use of common language—or more specifically the ability for these disciplines to write things that mean different things to different people on a personal level. If you were playing a game and the responses from the game come back to you in common language it would be as if the game really knew

who you are or can somehow predict your future. That is a very powerful type of response and just one more reason why gaming can reach people in ways that other media cannot.

***“There are three very interesting aspects of online gaming that influence users to keep playing games.”***

**Fraternities, Sororities, Dorm Houses, Cliques, Departments, and Majors**

Universities are one of the most segmented groups of individuals on the planet. An individual attending a university likely belongs to one of many groups. For example a person could be a “freshmen” living in a “sorority” called “Alpha Kappa Alpha” majoring in “engineering” with a minor in “business” and could be a member of other groups within the university such as its “booster club”. Each of these groups has characteristics associated with them. For example the Alpha Kappa Alpha has a website about the history of its members, the charter for its organization, the beliefs its members hold,

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etc. When you have such a population of individuals broken down into so many well-defined groups, you end up with a very powerful opportunity to really understand your market for potential products and services. Few service providers can match universities' ability to communicate with very specific groups of their students, faculty, and staff. However, it is this capability that empowers universities to more easily target potential gaming candidates over service providers. Service providers generally have very limited segmentation possibilities among their customers and potential customers—in addition to very limited means of communicating with these segmented groups.

## ***“What can US service providers do in preparation to go after this market?”***

Universities that are serious about gaming offer support for students, faculty, and staff such as providing instructions on how to connect game consoles to the university network (University of Wisconsin), equip rooms for LAN-based computer or console games (University of Auckland), links to locally hosted games available within the campus network, competitions or contests for interested students (Central Washington University), etc. Some universities even allow recreational use of university owned computers for use with computer games (State University of New York). Others are beginning to create Cyber Cafés where students, faculty and staff can go to engage in popular network computer games such as Quake II, StarCraft and WarCraft II (Michigan State University).

Universities are often highly networked in this day and age so that also promotes the wide spread use of online gaming where groups of similar individuals challenge other similar groups, or universities challenge other universities; many scenarios are pos-

sible. Wireless networking is spearheading the push for universities to offer more online gaming options to students, faculty, and staff within the campus network. The challenge from a university standpoint is to manage the mayhem that results from large numbers of students exercising their needs for MPOG. When all these people engage in such activity, it creates real challenges to the university's campus networks which must carry all this traffic between buildings as well as outbound to the Internet. When universities can keep all this traffic within their network, or better yet, localize it within a specific room it creates a much more manageable situation from a network engineering and capacity

planning perspective. Clearly doing nothing about rising gaming traffic costs the university dearly in Internet and intranet transport costs, not to mention the impact this traffic has on other legitimate university uses of the Internet such as research.

Today, the average age of gamers is 29, the core demographic is 18 to 35, and a third of game players are women (Entertainment Software Association). Cyber games are replacing TV, books, films, or exercise for 44 percent of these women (AOL Games/Digital Marketing Services). Since 18-24 year olds represent one of the hottest demographics in terms of selling products and services, what better place to do this than a university. Something also unique to the university is the selection process and the economics that come into play. Although universities go to great lengths to avoid this, stereotyping is part of the natural selection process. There are just so many people who will pay a certain amount of money to attend a certain university in a certain part of the country. As a result of this,

the general population of any university does have a lot in common.

### **Lessons for service providers**

While universities clearly lead US-based service providers in the rollout and embracement of online gaming services, the reverse is true outside the US. For example over 40.5 percent of China's 60 million netizens are regular visitors to 5,292 online game websites. In a report published earlier this year the State Press and Publication Administration confirmed that in 2003 online games earned the domestic market 1.32 billion Yuan, an amount likely to increase to 6.7 billion Yuan by 2007. This is good news for game operators (i.e. service providers) as it confirms that China's online game industry is the year 2004's most attractive investment proposition (China Today).

What can US service providers do in preparation to go after this market? The key lies within understanding what is making non-US based service providers (like those in China) and universities successful. Being able to breakdown, understand, and target specific groups of potential customers as well as existing customers is an area of recent focus. Increasingly, more service providers are realizing their means of communicating with their customers is grossly inadequate thus preventing rapid adoption of new services upon deployment. Essentially, each communication instance has a dollar figure associated with it and they really don't have a reusable, reliable mechanism other than direct advertising. Being able to communicate with customers is one important step that service providers are realizing, but targeting these communications to specific groups is at least a year (or more) away for most providers. ■

### **About the Author**

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