An Interview With Scott Clough, Avid On-Line Gamer

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of The Social Media Bible, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book every written on the subject of Social Media.

And today we are here with Scott Clough, an avid online gamer. And he's going to talk about online gaming, Social Media and how all the Social Networks come together. So, Scott, I'm glad to have you here.

SC: Hi, glad to be here.

LS: Yeah, this is going to be cool. Online gaming? What a phenomenon, and I've got to say that I have been following it, and people get really into it; and I didn't understand how much fun it was until I did the research for the book. I actually got involved in kind of a car race/demolition derby game called Flat Out 2bout two weeks ago. And being able to play on line and compete and work with people from around the world…from all over the entire globe at any given time of the day…I'm absolutely fascinated by this subject now.

So can you tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what your background is?

SC: Yeah, sure. Actually, I was playing a tabletop role-playing game, since probably the early 1980's. I started with games like Dungeons & Dragons, and honestly as a teenager I probably spent all of my free time doing so.

I then moved into playing computer games, especially ones that had elements of role-playing games in them. Games like Zork was a very early one; very simplistic. Then I moved up to playing games such as Ultima, Might & Magic, Art's Tale…and then they started making some of the Dungeons & Dragons into computer games.

I got involved in the online role-playing at about 1996 when I went through a divorce and had suddenly lots of time and in 1997 Ultima Online (the first of the genre) came out. And it gave me something to fill up my time.

I played Ultima Online until Everquest was released, and that was probably an online game that probably really made the whole genre successful, because the numbers became staggering…how many people were playing.

It had graphics that were just amazing; it had a world that was in full realistic, and I think all the current big games owe a lot to Everquest.

I use to play games with almost all my free time, but in later years I've learned to limit my playing. I also try to make sure it doesn't dominate my life and I stopped playing particular ones when I realized I'm not being entertained. But I always look for something else to move onto.

So I've tried a lot of the games over the years. I wish I had tried the [02:59.1] one; I'll have to look that one up.

LS: (Laughter) Yeah, I was absolutely fascinated. I kind of liked the Sims; I kind of like a simulated game. And then I got my brother and told him to go out and buy a copy of it (he lives in Denver, m brother Ed) and we started playing together and now we kind of tag team other drivers from around the world. It's kind of like the Mario Andretti or the Earnhardt Family. It's really exciting. I finally understand it when you do it.

SC: Actually gaming also lead to my current career.

LS: Oh!

SC: It was interesting; I got really interested in fixing up computers for myself and then I was building bigger and badder machines for friends and family, even. One day I was online all over the games and I was looking for another job, and a guy who I was gaming with, never met, I had said to him I was seeking a new job. And he said, "Would you be willing to relocate?" And I said, "Yeah, sure, as long as it was Arizona."

The next day I had an interview set up and since then I have been working in computer support and eventually ending up here at Hewlett Packard. (Laughter)

LS: Wow, so gaming actually got you your career?

SC: Yes it did!

LS: That's really cool. Can you tell our listeners what the term M-M-O-R-P-G…it's a big term and it has always been thrown around when we're talking about online games.

SC: Well, it was a term coined by Richard Garrett, creator of Ultima Online. It means, "Massively multiplayer online role playing game." Yeah…a mouthful!

LS: (Laughter) but that really does explain it though, doesn't it?

SC: Well, yeah, it gives an explanation of it. The terms was kind of coined to differentiate the different kinds of games that were out there at the time. You've got to realize, this kind of game was an evolution, and it's still in process. What had happened is back in the day, people where playing the very games I spoke of, such as Ultima, some of the Dungeons & Dragons games, and they were very active. The thing they kept saying they wanted to do was to be able to have a friend come over, like you with our brother, and play head-on-head or in the same world with it. And it was just a natural interest to say, "Hey, if we can make it so you can play with two, four friends, why not do it over the new medium called the internet," back at that time. And as you know Richard Garrett's [05:36.7] Alarm, which was the first one. And actually it was interesting because t hey had eight different versions of their stand-alone game before they came out with Ultima Online; and amazingly enough it's still out there!

LS: And it's being played in huge numbers!

SC: Uh, yeah. Actually the biggest one is World of Warcraft right now. Everybody sees that one the news. It advertises. It has ten million players worldwide.

LS: Isn't that amazing.

SC: Yes, it is.

LS: And that gets back to the "massive," the first "M" in the definition.

SC: Yes.

LS: And I understand that as well, because again it's playing the game myself I can play against the computer, or the bots, or the A.I. the artificial intelligence cars which will race against me or crash into me. And that's a lot of fun! But to actually be playing against other humans, I can definitely see the appeal where you can get online and actually compete with other people and not just the machine.

SC: Yes, but it also has some drawbacks, because where as a bot is going to react in a set mode based on the programming (and that has been developed more each year) some players that you get out there can be unethical. And they use cheats, hacks, exploits (as it's called out there) to get the edge on you rather than by skill.

LS: Well, and I've noticed that that's absolutely true. You brought up a really good point. Every once in a while we will play against somebody and all of a sudden this car will come out of nowhere doing 200 MPH and just clean our clocks! I say, "How the heck did that happen? That's not right!"

SC: That is one of the things that frustrates people in the games.

LS: And what type of people? I mean, what's the demographic of an online gamer?

SC: Well, it's really interesting. It's people in all the demographics, I would say. This is a hobby that has no separation by race, sex, religion…you know a lot of the people out there try to classify the online player as a teenage boy, you know! But I've run into family groups that play, moms, dads, and the kids. I have met professionals who play everything from computer engineers to lawyers to police officers, to soldiers sitting over in Iraq.

LS: Even book authors!!

SC: I've also ran into famous people, but authors have played, actors have played. I think even Mr. T has admitted he plays War of the Worldcraft.

LS: (Laughter) it really is addicting and you're right. In doing the research and coming across the statistics, the demographic really is all over the board. And the other thing that kind of surprised me; you think it's a male-dominated hobby or fascination, but women are out there playing too.

SC: Quite a few of them. I've actually talked to quite a few of them. They actually tend to be the more chatty; you can have conversation with them.

LS: Let's get right down to it. What do you think the actual appeal is? I mean why do you think when people get involved in this it can become an obsession? But what's the appeal? Why do people like to do this?

SC: You know the biggest appeal is the ability to be another person, or another entity. You can be a hero or a villain, just depending on how you want to play or the aspects of the game. There are some people out there who are dedicated to the role-playing aspects and it's interesting because the games have started to have to modify to have to get there.

So they have dedicated role-playing servers, where everything you say or do is suppose to be in character. There are other servers who are dedicated to player vs. player, and that's a real big growth area currently. And I would say most of the arguments in the games are about character balance in player vs. player. In case you weren't aware, but that's where other players kill/defeat real players in the game, and usually you get some type of reward.

But I think the real attachment in the games is the community aspect. Usually most of the games allow you to form up a group; usually called a guild. And the guild…you get to display your name over the name of the character; you get to solve a harder quest, kill the toughest monsters while working with people. And they do things such as raids where they get 50+ people to go after a single creature.

And while you're doing this you chat and you develop friendships. I've even know people to get married and divorced as a result of playing this game.

LS: (Laugher) is that right, really!

SC: Yes!

LS: That's amazing! (Laughter) Geez. So, yes, that I have to totally agree with you and that's why I thought that gaming, online gaming, really should be part of Social Media. A lot of people don't quite see it initially as being part of Social Media, but it is a form of media that really builds a social, trusted network. Do you agree?

SC: Oh, definitely! And, you know, the games appeal to both the casual gamer and the hard-core gamer, which is really nice. You know, some people just like to go in and play for a short little while, and other people basically spend every free moment that they have on it.

LS: Well, there is a certain kind of…I think there is some endorphin, or some type of adrenaline…I mean whatever the feel-good chemicals are, they're definitely are released during the game; because it is fun and I think the collaboration, as you mentioned, I think is a huge part of it. You can actually team up, form a strategy, and then feel that endorphin of success.

SC: Oh, absolutely! There is a lot of thrill that's…after eight hours of playing, say on a Saturday, killing the toughest monster in the game that nobody has ever killed…you know….

LS: Yeah, there is a certain satisfaction to that. Do you think businesses, small business/medium business/Fortune 500; do you think because of the huge massive amount of numbers that are involved…do you think that there's any reason that we ought to be watching this in terms of maybe understanding how there could be some possible revenue, or community building, in the genre?

SC: Oh, absolutely! It's something to watch because it's a new and developing technology and games such as World of Warcraft have shown the worldwide appeal of such games. But you know, it's not just the game itself that is being sold. There's now a thriving industry on the items that are in the game…virtual items.

There's a third party market on games guides, there's help websites. There's even companies out there that are selling online money gold and characters for real-world cash. Now most of the games are like, trying to shut this down, this behavior. And most players do not like it. And also some of the games are based on the current entertainment industry. There's a Matrix game, Pirates of the Caribbean, Starwars and there's even a StarTrek game in preproduction right now.

LS: Wow. That is pretty extensive. And yeah, I forgot about the whole Hollywood aspect of it. There could actually be huge.

When I wrote the chapter on Virtual Worlds, and we talked about Second Life, and some of the other virtual worlds, we also noticed that there is money exchanged within Second Life. Of course you probably know Lindens…where some games outlaw, and some games don't. Is that what you were talking about, where people are allowing you to buy advantages into the game?

SC: Yeah, there's online money. Actually, since most of the games are fantasy, it's gold, but there's also items in the game that people desire. Say for instance, a really powerful sword that's a very rare [13:37.5]. There's an organization out there that go and they, what's called "camping." They sit there and wait for the [13:44.0] that has it to respond and then when they get it, rather than using it for that character they turn it over to their company that sells it online. And I've seen back on some of the Ebay-equivilant sites are selling some of this stuff

I've seen items sell for hundreds of dollars.

LS: So they're actually harvesting, basically, key components of the game. That's hysterical! That's really funny! That's a great idea, though. I mean, you've got to love entrepreneurism.

SC: Well, yeah, but the problem is then they start spamming in the game that they sell these items from…the gold that they get. And in some of the areas, some of the companies have characters running 24 hours, just farming…where you're just killing things again and again and again, to get the gold. And it actually makes the area unusable by the regular players. So complaints get raised up and also there's a feeling when you have a guy who comes in who's saying he's a Level 70 because he bought an account already up there…he doesn't know how to play the character well in the game and so he makes mistakes and that gets the group killed.

LS: That absolutely makes sense. In real world I guess they call that a lottery winner.

SC: Yes, exactly.

LS: Doesn't know how to play the game, just has the money! What do you feel about inline/online advertising…in-game advertising?

SC: What I feel about it is it matters how it's done. I agree there needs to be advertising. There's a lot of opportunity to advertise in the games, especially when you cross into area zones. to balance the load on the

servers, the gamers are usually placed in regional zones. When you cross from one area to another, you get a flash screen that comes up. Now some of the companies put advice on how to play, but you know I don't have a problem if they put advertising…especially if it helps keep the revenue down. And there's nothing wrong with to stay in the racing game, to have billboards with real world advertising.

LS: Yeah, as long as it's done…that it doesn't interrupt the game play and you can offset some of the costs.

SC: Exactly.

LS: Yeah, that makes sense. Now there's three different kinds of ways to play the game, as far as….because you had mentioned keeping the costs down. There is "free-to-play" like Second Life. Then there's subscription and then there's buy-the-game and play.

Can you speak to any of those three models? Have you had any experience in those?

SC: Yeah, actually I've participated at least in two of them. The "buy-the-game" and then pay a subscription cost is probably the most common. Games like Everquest, World of Online, Age of Conan, Warhammer on Line, use that. Probably the biggest reason people would leave the game is because they hit a point where they say, "I'm spending this money and I'm not getting the enjoyment out of it."

Then you have game systems like Guildwars, where you pay for the initial game and they make the rest of the time free. And I've always wondered what the profit margins are like on both of them. In Guildwars they sell later expansions, but so do some of the other games, like Everquest is famous for having expansions probably about every year or two.

LS: That makes sense. With the [17:15.1] you basically buy the games…$39.95…and then to play with other players online you go through something called gamespy, and it's completely free. This I thought was kind of a pretty cool service that they are going to provide that for free. And there's no in game advertising or additional costs whatsoever. So it makes me wonder how they can afford it, unless they are….of course if the network is driving the sale of the games.

SC: Well in Game spy when you load up Game Spy you'll see some advertising.

LS: Yeah, that's true. Yeah, I didn't even notice it but it's absolutely true. So Game Spy is a company that provides that type of service for their games as well?

SC: Yes, if you were to go to Game Spy's website you would see that they provide the service for quite a number of games.

LS: Oh, I wasn't aware of it. Okay, that's pretty cool.

What else? In this gigantic genre of online gaming, what else would you think we should talk about?

SC: Well, I guess we should talk about first what kind of…what do players have they played. Earlier I had mentioned that is a casual gamer and a hard-core gamer, but that's not the only way they divide. In the games you also get to find out what kind of player you play. You'll hear…if you ever go online you'll hear someone

say, "I need to tank." That's a character who takes damage during an encounter. Usually a big, buff fighter and he can hold the monster's attention while healers help him heal. And GPS-ers, we call them damage per second. They do the damage to kill the monster, so you'll hear that language talked in the game.

Then there's people…how they act. I think earlier I mentioned we have [griefers 18:54.1] that go out and try to hurt other players using exploits and such. But we also have max miners. Those are people who play the game solely on statics. It's making me frustrated to talk to you because while you are playing they will say something like, "Why are you playing that clown with an elephant? If you played with [19:11.6] instead…..

Then there's the role-player that's talked about and then there's the elite people. Those are young gamers who use [19:20.6] speak, if you haven't covered that with anyone else yet. That's where they say, "You are using just the letters." And it annoys a lot of us older people.

LS: (Laughter)

SC: What else to talk about? You asked about some of the things…the history with the downside of this…because I've started to see divorces. I've had online friends who've told me they've lost their jobs and sometimes friends, family, over how much time they are spending in the game. There is occasionally a news report out there with people who get hurt or go to the hospital, because they spend too much time in the game, but you know I should say that with a game like War Hammer with 10 million people worldwide and you hear one report…that's an exception and not the rule.

The good news is though, game companies are aware that people are becoming addicted to these kinds of games. And several of the games have warnings that will appear as you log in saying, "Hey, you need to get up and spend some time around," and what's even better is some of the games you can actually set a timer that says after you been in the game for a couple of hours they will come up and say, "Hey, you need to take a break."

LS: It kind of reminds you of, like your wife.

SC: (Laughter) exactly!

Let's talk about what's really the downside and then talk about what I think is where the up side will go.

The biggest downside to these games is that most of the games are simply "kill something" to advance, find something to make yourself stronger, and your quests are you pulling out looking for something coming back. There's very little "real" role-playing that is involved on that because it's a computer.

All the quests are given out by the server itself, so it has to be command-oriented. Whereas if you're playing a tabletop game you have a player who can change the environment depending on what you're doing. So for a lot of the games, they are very repetitive, especially when you get to the high end where you're near the end of the game. You cannot level anymore. It becomes, "Well, what am I going to do now. I've done all of this?"

And I think that's the biggest problem that the gamers/companies have had; is keeping people. Right now World of Warcraft just released a new expansion and they've reported a flood of players have come back to the game. So people had left, they watched the numbers go down. And so they released a new version of it and

people have come back. And so the company is aware they have to already be working on the next expansion to keep these people interested.

But the other problems you have is what do you do when someone harasses you in the game? You talked about the guy who appears in a car who goes 200+ MPH and zooms by, and wins the event. But you know, he just took away from you.

What about people who get you killed, who use cheats and hacks to make your gaming experience poor? So you're out there trying to kill a super monster and the guy appears and pulls more monsters on you…more than you can handle and now you're dead… or what we call a "wipe" where everybody is killed and you have to start all over.

Well, in the real world if you acted in such a manner, you could get law enforcement involved, you could talk to a child's parents…in other words there's repercussions. But when you're playing these games you're anonymous and a lot of these younger people, and some of the people I think are kind of twisted, feel they're above the law.

LS: Yeah, that's just like real life!

Is there any type of….I know in forums you can flame them, you can get them knocked off the forum for inappropriate language and for trolling, and any type of inappropriate behavior. Is there any way…..or how about this idea….is there anyway where a bunch of people within the game can identify someone who is not playing by the rules, kind of team up on them, and the strategy would be to take them out.

SC: Sometimes. Sometimes. I remember when I was younger, I camped a guy, who I killed, for 48 hours; long enough for his corpse with all his items to disappear. Killed him every time he appears. That's really the exception and who wants to spend 48 hours sitting constantly at your computer, you know?

Really, you cannot police bad behavior currently, so they're working on that. They're trying to work on it. I give kudos to all the game systems, because they are trying. But what will be coming next? Well I was just talking with some other gamers just the other day. We were discussing how, with now 64-byte operating systems and computers out there, eventually we figure that the games are going to have a more virtual feel. Controllers, such as the Wii uses? You know we can see that brought over into this kind of world.

And it would be really neat if instead of sitting in front of your monitor you can look at more a virtual reality…and instead of just pressing a key/button to swing a sword….if you had, like a sword hilt in a Wii-type of format, and you actually swing it.

LS: So you have the actual physical interaction.

SC: Yeah, I think that's where the games are going to go onto, as more and more of them give a real, physical interaction. And that is exciting to envision.

LS: Yeah, I never thought about that, but yeah, the Wii game has tremendous physical interaction; everything from bowling to tennis to golf, to just about anything that's physical. That would be an incredible interface. Good point!

SC: I can see that as the next evolution in the gaming world and especially since they're the [25:02.9] 2.0, which is suppose to remove some of the bottlenecks in the internet. I can see that environment also as the bandwidth increases I can see more gaming content being out there.

LS: And that's a good point, too. You brought up broadband and really the game play right now, as it has always been, is really limited to either the speed of the computer in the old days, or really the speed of the internet connection now a days.

SC: Exactly.

LS: And, of course, that is dramatically increasing every single day.

SC: Yes, most of what you see when someone is playing a game is on their computer. All the graphic rendering is all done from their local machine. The amount of data, if you were to look at the packets that are being sent, usually are just X-Y-Z coordinates of where everybody is in relationship, and damage results back.

LS: Okay, so that's a really good point. So when you download the software on your own game, it's your own PC that's really doing the massive amount of computations necessary to generate the graphics. The only information that's being transmitted is really just the changes that are taking place.

SC: Exactly, so when you're in your car game and you're driving and you do a shift and you say, "Now I'm going this fast," you've really just translated to the servers that, "I did a shift," it comes back and says, "Yes, you can now have more speed," and it accelerates your movement through the world.

LS: Okay! So really it's still that some of the bottleneck could be on your own graphics card and CPU?

SC: Yeah. In fact a lot of the games allow you to change the level of graphics and on your home PC. So it's obvious that it's your machine that's generating them at that point.

LS: Oh, okay. Lower graphics, faster play.

SC: Yes. And you know, we still get lag out there on the internet, and people get disconnected because of a poor internet connection…so I think as Net 2.0 becomes a reality and a reliability hopefully goes up…I think some of the gaming styles will change also.

LS: Awesome, awesome. Absolutely true. And just to finish up our thought that you had brought up earlier about people becoming addicted…it really is the personality, not so much the game. Because I know they do take a bad rap where you hear a teenager goes out and does something stupid because he plays the game all the time. Then he mimics it in real life. But really, you can look at gambling as an issue. Anything really that generates endorphins; you've got to keep it under control. You can overeat; you can over drink, and over play.

SC: Exactly. I enjoy the fact that when I switch a game, I usually take a time period and enjoy real life. And I've come to the realization that I need to do that and not live in the game environment. So I went from being a very hard core gamer to more of a casual gamer; probably still more hard-core than a lot of other people out there.

LS: Well, honestly, you know more about this industry than anybody I've ever talked to. That's really great. If a business wanted to kind of study this, or an individual wanted to study this, is there any websites out there that talk about MMORPG's or about online gaming. Is there anyplace that you can go on the internet to find out more information?

SC: Yeah, actually if you're interested in statistics there's a great site, www.mmorg.chart.com and they actually chart how many people are playing in certain games, the basic activities. And you can actually look at how the games have gone up and down in their numbers…fascinating numbers…and the runner of the site tries to put it all in scientific methods, and he tells you where his data comes from so you can make your own evaluations on the reliability.

If you're more casual and you just want to know what your kids are getting involved in, you can go on the web and look for sites like www.alakazimes.com; you can go to the manufacturer of World of Warcraft and get information off of those. You can also buy magazines such as PC Gamer, which is one example. And you can always tell them apart because they will have screen shots of the various games on their cover usually.

But really, if you just want to know about the games, just go to any place that sells the software, such as Best Buy Electronics, and you'll see they have their own sections, their own shelves, and you can look at the game boxes and read what their claiming that their world gives to you. You can actually buy even game guides that tell you how the game is played.

LS: Ah, okay, or are the online games rated like some of the X Box games?

SC: Rated as inappropriateness?

LS: Yeah.

SC: Yes, some of them are.

LS: Oh, okay.

SC: Age of Conan, for example is one that's not recommended for younger children because they wanted to stay true to the artwork and the world of Conan. So scantily clad women, super buff guys….so it's just the graphics alone are not recommended for preteens.

LS: Okay, and that's another good point that you brought up about the manufacturers having their own sites, as well. You can just type in World of Warcraft and it will immediately take you to the manufacturer's site as well as some of the forums and other popular sites.

SC: Exactly. I recommend to anyone who wants to get into the gaming, first make sure you're is up there enough, and make sure that you can afford the to spend the time and money; but also go to the websites of the companies that you're thinking of doing, and just troll the forums. Just go through them and read what people are saying about the game before you make this investment.

LS: Really good advice. I really appreciate it. Anything else you'd like to add?

SC: I guess the final thing I should throw out is this isn't a cheap work anymore. In 2006 over one billion dollars was spent on these types of games.

LS: This is billion, with a "B"?

SC: "B," yes.

LS: (Laughter) see, and that's why businesses need to watch where this is headed, because when you're talking about a billion dollars and 10 million people in one game, there's got to be a way to monetize. If not for anything else, just the Social Network aspect of it.

SC: Exactly.

LS: That's terrific. I would really like to thank Scott Clough, avid online gamer, for being here with us today and talking about Social Networking and online gaming. Really, Scott, thank you!

SC: You're welcome; it's always fun to talk about it.

LS: This is cool. This has been Lon Safko, the co-author of The Social Media Bible. Be sure to check out our other valuable Social Media tactics, tools, and strategies that can be found in The Social Media Bible book and its companion website, www.TheSocialMediaBible.com. And for more information about me, Lon Safko, please by all means visit my website at www.LonSalko.com.

And again, thank you Scott for being here today.

SC: It was my pleasure.