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“No Noobs Plz”: The Role of Salient Group Identities on Interaction in World of Warcraft

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Submission to Meaningful Play 2010 Conference

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The rise of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) provides a new outlet for research in computer-mediated communication. Socialization is often cited as a primary reason for gameplay (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee, 2009), and is often essential to completion of in-game tasks (Yee, 2006); therefore, it is important that in-game interactants develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. This becomes even more important for less experienced players who are not familiar with either in-game norms nor many of the intricacies related to gameplay. New players may choose from a number of outlets through which to gather information about the game, including playing with offline friends, seeking help from specific players in the game through the game’s instant messaging program, or reading online forums. Another option, using the game’s server-level chat system, connects individual players with potentially thousands of other players currently logged into the game.

On its surface, sending messages through the public chat system appears to be an efficient way of receiving answers to game-related questions. As noted by Granovetter (1974), having access to a diverse network of individuals is the best way to find information related to hard-to-answer questions. In other words, a player can be reasonably certain that posting a general game question, such as which armor is the best choice to buy or how to complete an in-game task, will be viewed by a large number of other players who have that knowledge, and at least someone who is willing to reply.

On the other hand, research by Granovetter (1973, 1974) and others focuses on an individual’s established network of connections, ranging from close friends and family members to coworkers, classmates, and acquaintances. Within the MMORPG, however, the other players

are strangers, connected only by their interest in the game, available game statistics such as player name and race, and membership in a specific faction of players such as a guild.

Qualitative research by Nardi and Harris (2006) found that players actively engage with strangers and that an atmosphere of respect characterized participants' experiences. Furthermore, nearly all participants reported using chat channels to ask for game-related help. It could be that a norm of generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000) exists within the game, whereby people offer assistance with the belief that they will need assistance at some point in the game and, at that time, someone will offer to help them.

An alternative framework through which to examine the outcomes associated with using public chat channels to ask questions or seek in-game assistance is the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE). This model's main premise is that in deindividuated (i.e., visually anonymous) settings, individuals rely on social—rather than personal—identities to guide their behavior toward others (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). While an individual player may have multiple social identities (e.g., female player, troll character, Horde faction), SIDE posits that it is the salient social identity that determines who is a member of the “ingroup” and who is not (i.e., the “outgroup”) (McLeod and DiDario, 2007). While there are obvious salient identities within MMORPGS—most notably between opposing factions—it could be that a salient group identity among players relates to their in-game experience and achievements. In other words, higher-leveled, veteran players may designate an imaginary line regarding another player's stats (level, accomplishments, etc.) and deem those players who do not meet these standards as members of the outgroup.

At its most benign level, ingroup members may choose to ignore outgroup members' postings within the chat channel; at its most serious, they may choose to harass the player asking

the question verbally or through in game actions such as preventing a player from completing a quest. If the latter is true, then it holds significant implications for new players: based on negative responses to questions posed to other players, a new player may choose to stop playing the game, which could negatively impact the game developers' bottom line. Therefore, it is important to assess the various types of interactions are occurring within the game to determine which framework may be at work within the game. The present study takes a first step at establishing how various players employ the public chat channel within *World of Warcraft* (WoW) to interact, and specifically to ask and answer game-related questions.

Method

To address this question, a qualitative content analysis was conducted, whereby a game add-on (WOWScribe Chat Logger) captured 32 hours of posts in the general and trade channels over two weeks in April 2009. Chat logs were pulled from two PvP (i.e., player-vs.-player) and two Normal servers, as well as for both Alliance and Horde characters to create a more rigorous dataset. As previous research has found that the peak play time for players is between the hours of 6 p.m. and 12 a.m. (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005), the majority of logging occurred during these hours each day of the data collection period, with additional chats logged during afternoon hours on weekends. Transcripts were then imported into the qualitative data analysis software program Atlas.ti.

Applying a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), transcripts were examined and subsequently coded based on emergent themes related to various types of interactions occurring through chat, with a focus on question-and-answer based interactions. In order to simplify analysis, any questions related to gameplay mechanics such as how to complete an in-game quest or what behaviors a specific type of character can perform are assumed to come

from less-experienced players. While impossible to ascertain the skill level of those players providing responses to these questions, all responses are considered, as the source of a negative response most likely does not matter to the recipient of the negative feedback.

Findings and Discussion

Findings indicate that the most popular purpose for using the chat channels in WoW is for higher -level players to recruit other players to complete large-group quests, as well as to trade, buy, or sell game-related items. Asking game-related questions was also common, with two major types of questions emerging. Very specific, action-related questions (e.g., “is horde raidin[sic]?”) were likely to garner immediate responses, probably because they potentially impacted a larger group of players beyond the question asker. On the other hand, simple game-related questions were often ignored or met with derision. For example, when a player asked how to fly within the game, the request was met several sarcastic responses, such as “flap your arms” and “defy gravity.” Another player asking a simple technical question related to gameplay received the response, “wow ppl are so dumb i have asked if it hurts but they never answer...i guess the pain is overwhelming.” The fact that players take the time to post negative responses—rather than simply ignore a question they don’t want to answer—suggests they want to assert their power over the inexperienced player, to “put them in their place,” or encourage that player and others with “frivolous” questions to stop posting them.

A common method of demeaning other players—and, in turn, labeling them as an outgroup member—is to call them a “noob,” a derisive term referring to new players that implies an individual is incompetent or don’t belong. The data suggest that many players take the attitude that all players should be highly knowledgeable about the game; when a player shows a lack of knowledge, others are quick to single out the player for negative attention and label them as a

noob. For example, one player noted in the chat channel, “some noob thinks i want to waste my time following him around just cause i targeted him as i ran past him,” implying the other player didn’t understand simple game mechanics. Furthermore, on multiple occasions when characters announced that they were reporting a player who was using inappropriate language in the chat channel, they were often ostracized and verbally assaulted for violating an implicit norm of “anything goes.” For example, when a player announced reporting another player for swearing, players responded with “yer a friggin noob” and “reporting is for little kids, if your [sic] a kid go play alliance with the rest of them.”

For serious players whose primary gaming objectives relate to completing quests and instances, inexperienced players will very likely be detrimental to achieving their in-game goals. Therefore, these players often make it very clear when recruiting for groups that only the most experienced of players should apply; for example, one player wrote, “*LF NON NOOBS to join our new guild... NO NOOBS PLZ.*” As many higher level quests take hours to coordinate and complete, most players are probably hesitant to invite non-experienced players to join their group, as even one player acting out of line can ruin any chances of the team successfully reaching their goal. These findings support previous research by Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006). However, the blatant aversion to less experienced players may discourage these players from engaging other players for help.

Conclusion

The present study considers interactions within a widespread, public chat channel in the *World of Warcraft* to ascertain the process through which less experienced players seek game-related information and how other players respond to such requests. WoW is a complex game that requires a significant time commitment in order to become proficient, and many players

devote 30 or more hours per week to gameplay (Yee, 2006). Furthermore, experienced players may believe they have “paid their dues” by spending so much time playing the game, and subsequently take a negative approach toward inexperienced players who violate game norms or ask simple questions that can be answered through other forums.

These findings have a number of implications for researchers interested in social interactions in online spaces. First, when considering the public chat channel as an entry point into the game, new players may face an unwelcoming environment that discourages requests for assistance. For players who do not have an offline friend to guide them through the initial weeks of gameplay, the complexity of WoW can be quite overwhelming. Even after a player goes through the somewhat confusing process of choosing a race and class for his character, he is then thrown into the game with little explanation or direction. As he moves forward in the game, the choices become much more intricate, from choosing professions to deciding what skills to level up and which equipment and items to purchase. However, if he uses the chat channel in a city to ask for advice, it appears he is just as likely to be met with derision and insults as he is to receive a helpful answer. If he does choose to ask for assistance, he should probably attempt to mask his inexperience—a difficult task when hundreds, if not thousands of veteran players are reading his posts. Similarly, players who are young or female may also feel compelled to mask their identities so as to avoid unwanted attention from others who revel in picking on those players who know less than they do or are different than the perceived norm (i.e., that of young, technologically savvy men). Successfully maintaining this ruse can be a very daunting task, especially for those players not well-versed in the expansive lexicon and acronyms that appear in nearly every post.

Thus, new and experienced players are presented with a potential paradox: because they are not presented with a guidebook of “do’s and don’ts” when they first start playing the game, they will invariably violate social norms due to ignorance. However, when they do violate these norms, they are as likely to be rebuked, and may even be harassed to the point where they no longer want to play the game, as they are to receive advice on what they did wrong and how to avoid it in the future. For Blizzard Entertainment, these findings should be especially disheartening, as the company’s primary source of revenue comes from monthly subscription fees.

This study constitutes a first step at understanding the relationship between various types of players in WoW. Future research should apply both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to explore these findings in more detail, especially in regards to the unspoken norms guiding in-game behavior, how players’ perceive salient group identity, and how that identity impacts their interaction with other players. Game design implications should also be considered that encourage new players to ask questions in an environment conducive to receiving positive support and guidance and discourage the kinds of verbal assaults that may lead new players to leave the game.

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