

When Social Networking Meets Online Games: The Activity System of Grouping in *World of Warcraft*

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ABSTRACT

Using activity theory and genre theory as bases for analysis, this article examines the activity of grouping in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. The article first examines what grouping “does” in the overall context of the game, including its socialization and gameplay functions. Grouping involves a series of interactions and conventions that structure gameplay objectives and model expected behavior. Groups are formed through specific interfaces in the game that enact social networking processes and can be examined comparatively alongside web-based social networking technologies. By looking at interface design, the article identifies how grouping as an activity is mediated and what social expectations are put in place when players participate in groups.

Next, the article considers the role of other texts in the activity system of grouping, focusing on two examples: the game FAQ and message board. The FAQ is especially noteworthy as an instance of player-produced technical writing. Players write FAQs to document basic game information, present game strategies and walkthroughs, and help other players solve problems. As a genre, this type of FAQ is characterized by a number of tensions that can productively challenge how we think about the conventions of electronic and printed text. FAQ writers make different kinds of rhetorical moves that situate the text within the larger activity of gaming and outline specific purposes and audiences. The FAQ is also examined here in the context of message board interaction, which is used in part for more localized discourse that the FAQ does not address specifically. Working at various levels of abstraction and consolidation, this system of online texts mediates group activity and provides a space for extra-game interactions to directly influence the in-game interactions and behaviors of players (and vice versa).

Categories and Subject Descriptors

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major concerns in the research of digital games is the issue of engagement and motivation. This comes up especially in the work done on games and learning, the main question being how to use the sustained interest that players have in digital gaming for educational purposes. For example, James Paul Gee has explored this question in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*: “Video games have the potential to lead to active and critical learning. In fact, I believe that they often have a greater potential than much learning in school (even through school learning may involve learning ‘content’)” ([7], p. 46). Gee points out that the learning environments in video games (at least in games that are well-designed) are set up in such a way to promote the decoding and interpretation of situated meanings, which change according to context and thus require different play strategies. Gee contrasts this practice with the delivery of static “content,” which might convey factual information but does not facilitate the same kinds of learning processes. However, the message about using games for learning comes with some caveats; this does not mean that gameplay always results in the best form of learning or increases players’ motivation to learn. The issue is not just about using video games (or not using them) in the classroom, either. Rather, Gee suggests that video games utilize sets of practices, related to modality, semiotics, identity, embodiment, cognition, and literacy, that we should be paying attention to and consider implementing in classroom-based education, whether that is done through video games themselves or other means.

The same questions can be considered in the context of technical writing practices as they relate to games and game playing. Before I discuss motivation, though, I wish to explore how technical writing intersects with games in the first place.

Up to this point, scholars have paid a good deal of attention to issues in digital games such as genre [17], interactivity [6], and problem solving [7], [11], but there has been less work done on

games as sites of textual production. With the emergence of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, players have turned to online writing communities to discuss game activities, strategies, and problems. Message boards and blogs are devoted specifically to these topics, and players can even locate more specific communities based on criteria such as character class. Bonnie Nardi, in an interview with Mark Zachry, has recently discussed the possibility of researching virtual communities with a focus on these issues of textual production. Nardi explains, “So let’s take my current games research [on *World of Warcraft*]. I spend a lot of time actually playing the game, but I’m also reading the forums where people write about their own game play. They give advice and hints. They vent their frustrations with the game. There is all kinds of dialog about the games on these forums. I read the manuals. I always read the manuals because they present the way the company thinks about the product, which I always find interesting, as well as how people actually learn to use it. I read people’s blogs. In other words, I go to all these collateral materials that describe whatever it is I’m looking at” ([12], p. 491). In-game communication is also crucial in facilitating many of the functions of online games, including coordination between group members, trading, and social networking [10]. Of course, these phenomena are by no means limited to or dependent upon *World of Warcraft* or the MMORPG genre; I simply use them to illustrate the role of online writing (or more broadly, online communication) in contemporary video gaming.

So what does all of this have to do with *technical* writing? For one, the videogame industry does produce several kinds of texts that fall under the conventional “technical writing” category. Instruction writing (manuals), documentation, and localization are all processes that happen for many digital games produced and sold to a mass-market audience.

However, my interest here lies not in the technical writing done by game developers and associated professionals, but that done by players. Players do generate technical writing documents, and one representative genre that I will pay particular attention to in this article is the FAQ (sometimes also referred to as a “walkthrough” or “guide,” a tension I will revisit later) written for a specific game. Many of these FAQs are published at the website GameFAQs (www.gamefaqs.com), categorized according to game and platform.

In addition to serving as a reference guide for players, the game FAQ acts as a paratext to the game; it is not part of the game itself, but it is used by players to negotiate and make sense of the central “text” of the game. As Gérard Genette argues, “more than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold” ([9], p. 2). The paratext is “a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [. . .] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)” ([9], p. 2). My initial question concerning FAQ production was the one I raised at the beginning of this article on motivation: why are players motivated to write game FAQs, for seemingly little benefit and recognition? Why is so much time invested in writing them, and what rewards are involved, if any? However, the idea of paratext leads me to consider a different focus, one that includes motivation but also

includes deeper implications of the ways in which FAQs, technical writing, and player communication comprise part of the *activity system* of playing games.

Game FAQs are just one paratext that players may use in the larger activity of playing a game. In this article, I will attempt to begin tracing the system(s) of texts that players read, use, appropriate, and produce in playing the game *World of Warcraft*. Because FAQs represent an instance of player-produced technical writing, I will pay special attention to the role that they play, drawing from GameFAQs as a source. My focus will be on a specific activity that is a subset of the larger activity of *World of Warcraft* as a whole: grouping. Although I have chosen to focus on grouping, other game activities such as raiding or character creation could also be approached with the same kind of analysis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

2.1 Activity Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is influenced by activity theory, which I bring in as a method of “examining the text-mediated interaction of multiple participants as organized in the patterned social relations of activity systems that vary according to the practices and cultures of social collectivities” ([8], p. 273). Activity theory also helps to identify the ways in which texts “become consequential for activities that are less obviously text centered” and “serve to organize activities, not only through direct regulation [. . .] but also through the affordances of the text” ([8], p. 273). Activity theory is a particularly interesting mode of analysis to employ in the context of games, because games are dependent on both written and unwritten rules of play and the negotiation of these rules by players [13].

In “Expansive Visibilization of Work: An Activity-Theoretical Perspective,” Yrjö Engeström presents an activity theory model, or “the mediational structure of an activity system” ([3], p. 66). This model is comprised of a complex, multidirectional set of interactions among instruments, subject(s), object(s), rules, community, and division of labor, leading to particular outcomes.

Although I will not strictly be attending to Engeström’s formulation of the activity system in my analysis, one of the goals of this article is to consider the ways in which games can challenge how we understand and use activity theory. For example, the rules in a game are often approached as mutable and are changed by the player community with the goal of establishing balanced play [2]. The conscious foregrounding of rules in player communities, as well as the constant, freeform process of revision (in some cases and depending on the type of game), can lead us to think in different ways about the function of rules, the relationship between community and rules, and other points of interaction within an activity system.

2.2 Genre Theory

Another major theoretical backing for this study is genre theory, particularly the social turn that genre theory has experienced. In their discussion of Carolyn Miller and genre theory, Geisler et al. note, “in rhetorical terms, genres are typified responses to typified situations, providing typified motives and forms of realization” ([8], p. 277). Aviva Freedman argues that “the notion of genre has in fact been reinterpreted and redefined, so that rather than focusing on formal and textual regularities, (genres as text-types),

genre scholars focus on the ACT, the action or the activity that is undertaken through the genre. The textual regularities are seen to be correlates or traces of the social action that takes place” ([4], p. 2). Moving beyond the scope of single genres, Clay Spinuzzi and Mark Zachry present the “genre ecology” as a way of understanding genres, which “includes an interrelated group of genres (artifact types and the interpretive habits that have developed around them) used to jointly mediate the activities that allow people to accomplish complex objectives” ([15], p. 172).

In looking at the game FAQ as a genre, there are a number of tensions that might be used to problematize the ways in which we think about the conventions and uses of both printed and electronic text. The game FAQ simultaneously embraces and resists certain conventions of writing for the web; for example, FAQs take advantage of the searchability of electronic text with unique “codes” for each section, yet there is generally no hyperlinking to other documents, even in places where other online texts are referenced explicitly. By identifying these slippages and contradictions in the FAQ as a genre, this study will draw out the affordances and constraints that these texts represent and consider how players use them within specific game activities. In turn, a broader scope could be taken to look at the wider system of texts/genres that mediate the activities of online gameplay.

3. GROUPING

3.1 As an Activity

Grouping is an in-game activity that allows up to five players on the same server with the same alignment (i.e., Alliance or Horde) to join up and play together. I have chosen to focus on grouping as the subject of analysis because it serves as a localized form of social networking, one that is more transient and less hierarchical than other virtual social structures like the guild. Guilds and guild-based activities (e.g., raiding) have received significant attention from scholars studying massively multiplayer online games [16], and although grouping has not gone ignored, it has received comparatively less attention.

At the most obvious level, grouping links players together, but what exactly are its functions in the larger context of the game? Blizzard’s official game guide notes: “You don’t have to adventure alone in World of Warcraft. In fact, the game can be more fun when you join with other players. Quests that are too difficult alone can be surprisingly easy to accomplish when you group with other players. If you group with other players frequently enough, they might even become regular adventuring companions and friends” [20]. Part of the appeal in grouping, at least in Blizzard’s “pitch” to its players, is the social networking function of groups: having a good time and making friends to play with later. From a player’s perspective, this social interaction allows for a more enjoyable game experience and builds social capital that can be exercised in the completion of game objectives. Adopting an activity-theoretic view, though, also draws out how grouping helps to construct the player community on a localized level. Groups, whether extemporaneous or premeditated, are formed with a certain object or action in mind—to complete a quest or raid a dungeon, for example. Both in-game and out-of-game instruments are used in the construction of groups, including a set of game interfaces and related online texts. The grouping interface, as a textual instrument, organizes these

common game actions and configures them to the player as functions they can use to find the right “type” of group.

Groups are also tied to the challenge of the game design, which encourages cooperative play by making some quests difficult for solo players. The game’s reward structure is thus part of social play; quest rewards are more attainable and can be accumulated faster if you choose to cooperate with others in the same situation.

Mikael Jakobsson and T.L. Taylor, in their analysis of social networking in *Everquest*, note that players often create a group of characters with “different but complementary” skills to maximize efficiency and achievement in doing quests, leveling, and other game activities ([10], p. 83). Considered in the context of Engeström’s activity theory model, players can build an ad hoc community with a better, more efficient division of labor to achieve their objectives. For example, a healing character such as a priest can focus on the action of healing during battle, rather than forcing characters without healing spells to flee from battle to regenerate health. This division of labor also functions as one of the unwritten rules of grouping as an activity. Characters with abilities overlapping those already represented in the group are not “needed,” so players are expected to locate a group in which their characters fill a specific, needed role and do not duplicate other roles.

Jakobsson and Taylor also place emphasis on the moment-to-moment chatting that helps to construct social networks and set expectations for future interaction: “There are many unformalized conventions about how to behave in groups. One is that it is considered good manners to let the group know in advance that you are about to leave. Another is that you exchange parting salutations before splitting up. These can be seen as a discreet evaluation of the group. If the group was nothing special, a simple ‘see you later’ is appropriate, but if a member wants to signal that he would be interested in sharing a group again, the parting statement would be more like ‘great grouping with you guys, hope to see you soon’” ([10], p. 83). Setting aside the issue of etiquette, which is actually given significant treatment in the Blizzard game guide, it is clear that group chat is about more than just immediate action. The value of a particular group as part of various game activities and objectives is *negotiated* by all of the subjects/players, and the outcome of the activity (not only its outcome in terms of what was achieved, but also its perceived amount of success as a social activity) becomes an influence on future activity. The convention of exchanging chat messages using the group chat function, then, evaluates prior activities and organizes how players will use grouping in future instances of play.

3.2 Interfaces

Players can join groups through a few different interface options in the game. Both are subsets of the main game interface.

The first interface option allows players to associate groups with their friends list. By associating the game’s grouping function with the friends list, the interface design in *World of Warcraft* encourages players to build off pre-existing social contacts in forming groups, and to add friends from groups that have been successful and enjoyable. In terms of activity theory, both of these interface functions mutually support each other in the building of a localized player community, although they do not necessarily

represent the same objectives—a player may just want to chat with others on his or her Friends List, while grouping is usually linked to specific gameplay actions.

Although online games have offered social interface options like the friends list for several years, this overlap and cross-functionality among friends lists, private messaging, grouping, and other forms of social interaction in games mirrors emergent social networking technologies on the web such as Facebook. For example, Facebook contains a general “Friend List,” but its interface also lets users participate in private messaging, invitations, and groups aligned with individual topics or interests. The second interface option to join a group uses the “Looking for Group” and “Looking for More” features.

The interesting function of this interface is how it ties social networking and the formation of groups to objects and motives. That is, players are not just looking for a group because they’ve decided arbitrarily that they want to participate in one; they search for a group to “do” something in a particular goal-driven context, and the affordances of the interface allow for such goals to drive the formation of groups. These goals can be based on events and activities (e.g., raids and quests), or they can be driven by the players’ spatial and geographic position in the game world (e.g., by zone). As a social networking feature, interest matching allows users to quickly filter through and find other users with similar characteristics and objectives. *World of Warcraft*’s “Looking for Group” interface also allows for multiple simultaneous filters, similar to advanced searching in database systems.

The “Looking for More” feature serves the inverse function, populating a list of groups that have already been formed but need one or a few more players to fill out the group. In the context of an activity system, the inclusion of level and class as identifiers helps groups perform the division of labor, deciding who will do what and what their competencies are in those assigned tasks. The interface, and the way players use it, also reinscribe the unwritten social rule that characters should fulfill a distinct function in the group that maximizes the group’s efficiency as a whole.

3.3 Associated Genres

3.3.1 FAQs

The Game FAQ is, I would argue, a type of text that can be considered a genre, both in its use of textual and formal features and its role in directing and facilitating social activity. In terms of textual form and content, the GameFAQs website explains that FAQs are expected to contain a walkthrough, which “should take the player step-by-step through a game, from beginning to end, getting past every tricky point in the game. Walkthroughs almost always include tips on defeating tough enemies, puzzle solutions, and sidequest information” [5]. The “almost always” here signifies the typification of content but recognizes that there is some flexibility and instability at work in the genre. Some games, including *World of Warcraft*, cannot be accounted for in this linear fashion, so GameFAQs presents an alternative set of textual features that should be included for those types of games.

FAQs also include other textual features that establish a typified form. They contain a table of contents, sometimes with unique textual codes that make individual sections easier to locate. They are organized by numbered sections that may contain subsections.

As presented on the GameFAQs website, FAQs are almost exclusively published in plain ASCII text. FAQs include extensive “version histories” as a section of the text, which signifies the process of revision that is an expected part of FAQ writing.

Ironically, many game FAQs do not follow the conventions of a traditional “FAQ” (in the sense of Frequently Asked Questions plus answers); there may not be any questions involved, which would make the text more of a guide than anything else. GameFAQs addresses this tension by noting, “On GameFAQs, ‘FAQ’ is often synonymous with ‘Guide’, ‘File’, ‘Walkthrough’, ‘Strategy Guide’, and several other names” [5].

On the surface, this would seem to undermine the claim for game FAQs as a genre, but GameFAQs appeals to the *social role* of the FAQ in explaining the lack of a consistent genre label: “Regardless of the nomenclature, it generally all comes down to just providing help for gamers who read the guide” [5]. The form of social action that this “help” can take is further specified: “A FAQ, or ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, has hundreds of definitions [*sic*], but for the purposes of GameFAQs, it’s simple [*sic*] a guide that helps people either defeat a game, become more skilled at it, or provides information about it” [5]. Following the social constructions of genre reviewed earlier, what defines the FAQ as a genre is these particular social activities that it undertakes and helps players carry out. The textual and formal features of the FAQ are designed to help facilitate the social role of the text, such as providing avenues for quick reference when players need to look up information during gameplay to accomplish certain objectives.

3.3.2 Grouping FAQ

In the *World of Warcraft* section on GameFAQs as of May 2007, there were 42 published FAQs and guides. Of these, 1 is a general FAQ, 17 are devoted to specific character classes, and 24 are “In-Depth FAQs,” which are concerned with more specific game topics such as individual quests or skills. Even though there is a separate FAQ archive for the latest *World of Warcraft* expansion pack (*The Burning Crusade*), few complete FAQs have been published due to its recent release date, so my focus will be on FAQs in the original *World of Warcraft* section. One (and only one) FAQ focuses specifically on grouping, appropriately titled “Grouping FAQ.” This FAQ is one of the more recent additions to the site, having been published on February 12, 2007.

Returning to the idea of FAQ as paratext, I am particularly interested in how FAQ authors situate their texts within the larger gaming community. How do FAQ authors identify and perceive their audience(s), and what purposes and needs do these texts fulfill? As a way to begin unpacking these questions, I will examine the Grouping FAQ as a case study in the context of grouping as a game activity.

The introduction to the Grouping FAQ, authored by a user with the screen name “omegachaos,” reads: “Hello and welcome to my first FAQ! If you’re having trouble looking for a group or are always finding the worst people to group with, this is the FAQ for you! Now you’ll have the knowledge you’ll need to group with the right people in a PUG (Pick-up group). Read on to find out more about grouping. Note: This is more for instance grouping than quest grouping” [18]. The author employs several

rhetorical/textual cues in this short paragraph to establish audience and purpose, as well as suggest what the reader's expectations should be moving forward. The FAQ is not targeted at novice users; the second sentence implies that readers who use this FAQ should have at least some experience in playing in or searching for groups. The introduction also suggests that the FAQ will focus more on group efficiency and achievement, rather than the socialization aspects of groups, thus giving players the "knowledge" to find the "right" kind of group. The author presents and defines a specialized abbreviation, introducing the reader to particular literacies that they will need to understand group-oriented communication. Finally, the author limits the scope of the FAQ even further by associating it with a specific subactivity (instance grouping).

The second section of the FAQ, "Basics of a Good Group," notes that "all basic groups need to consist of a tank, healer, and DPS (damage per sec.) classes" [18]. This is in line with Jakobsson and Taylor's argument about how players seek out "different but complementary" skill sets to maximize the group's effectiveness. In fact, this takes up a prescriptive connotation in the FAQ; having group members that fulfill these three complementary roles is not merely a preference, it "needs" to happen for a good group to exist. By framing the FAQ this way, the author relates much of the following content to specific character classes and the roles that they are expected to play in groups.

After briefly discussing the two main types of activities that groups are created for (quests and instances), the FAQ moves into "Functioning Inside a Group." This section covers two sequential actions, pulling and fighting, that happen in the larger activity of grouping. This section is loaded with specialized terminology that requires some level of familiarity with the game and its literacies. For example, one passage reads, "With 3 mobs, you'll want to have either a mage sheep pull or a rogue sap stun and have the hunter or warrior pull the remaining two. If the mob is hit while stunned, he'll go to whoever is the highest on his aggro list. If he was sheepeed, the mage can simply re-sheep the mob until the other two are dead. If he was sapped, then the tank is going to have an extra mob to tank, and it might cause a few problems for the tank trying to keep aggro" [18]. For an entirely new player who has stumbled upon this guide looking for advice, the text becomes increasingly difficult to decipher. However, the rhetorical features of the guide operate such that a specific audience is targeted, made explicit to readers, and kept in awareness throughout the entirety of the text.

The next FAQ section, "Roles to Play," explains how each character class falls into one of the three basic roles identified in the second section. For example, the mage is described as "THE best ranged DPS class in the game" [18]. Under each character class is a summary of relevant skills that can be used to perform that role; for the mage, "they cause excellent damage to the mob and also have the ability to polymorph (or sheep) a mob to temporarily put them out of the fight. They have an AOE (Area of effect) attack that is very useful in taking down a crowd of non-elite mobs" [18]. Some classes are identified as capable of performing multiple roles. The druid description starts with: "These guys are a special type of class. They have the ability to become three different forms" [18]. Nonetheless, the author makes one final appeal at the end of this section for a distinct division of labor that group members should be responsible for

upholding: "All these classes play a specific role and aren't meant for other roles. A priest isn't meant to tank and a warrior isn't meant to heal. If you have trouble figuring that out, you are definitely not the person to group with, and should throw your computer out the window and get a worthwhile job" [18]. Strong words indeed! The violation of this division of labor as negotiated by the player community results in a breakdown, one that reveals the emotional and ethical stakes of the game as an activity system and renders explicit the expectations that players have for each other.

Related to this last point, the FAQ concludes with a section on "Players to Avoid." This section covers various player archetypes that undermine a successful and enjoyable group experience. One such player category is referred to as Mr. Speedy, who "likes to finish instances fast and doesn't know the meaning of health and mana regeneration. He is always constantly pulling mobs to the group and always complains whenever the group wipes to either the healer or tank for not gaining aggro or healing people" [18]. This section, especially, reveals that the FAQ is also concerned with the socialization experience of grouping, inasmuch as poor group members undermine group efficiency and lead to dissatisfying or even upsetting gameplay experiences. In the end, the two cannot be separated; generally, players who perform their expected roles and take their fair share of rewards become friends, and players who violate the community's expectations are not called upon for future groups.

The Grouping FAQ is not as technical as some other kinds of FAQs, as it does not include documentation writing. Rather, it is a hybrid of game strategies and advice drawn from personal experience in dealing with "bad" group members. Other FAQs, usually listed in the "General" category, include documentation of game features like the control scheme or the statistical characteristics of individual items. This becomes another source of tension underlying what FAQs are supposed to "do" within the overarching activity of gaming; some players visit them to pull out technical information, and some players seek a discussion of optimal strategies. The multiplicity of audiences and purposes, then, is a factor influencing the classification and subclassification of FAQs into specific areas of interest, as well as the generic conventions that characterize individual FAQs.

A related question concerning FAQs is: where do they appear in the chain of texts that *World of Warcraft* players use? At what point would someone turn to an FAQ for assistance, rather than relying on in-game networks? There is some difficulty in determining how this happens, because players rarely mention FAQs in game chat, and there is no way to connect a record of individual player actions to what texts they read outside of the game. However, by looking at related communication spaces like *World of Warcraft* message boards, we can start identifying how texts like the FAQ are constructed, how players draw upon them, and for what purposes.

3.3.3 Message Boards

GameFAQs, in addition to FAQs and guides, hosts message boards devoted to individual games. Most message boards are designed for players to discuss gameplay strategies and experiences, although there are also message boards specifically on FAQ writing (serving as a kind of meta-discussion).

In keeping with grouping as the focus, I have identified instances where players discuss grouping strategies and practices on the GameFAQs *World of Warcraft* message board. My goal in doing so is to start to locate how players negotiate texts and artifacts in their grouping activity. One message board thread is titled “Is it just me or are groups really hard to find” and contains the initial post and six replies, one of which is by the original author. The initial post reads [19]:

Like, ive got a pretty good (small though) guild of people who like to run the odd instance together, but we are all pretty busy in real life so they arent online all day all night. Obviously, i want to run instances when they ARENT online too so i figured yesterday i'd find a group for sunken temple.

I went into the looking for group interface, selected 'sunken temple' and was matched up with a 50 rogue straight away! Good right? I stayed in that party for over an hour without finding a single other person who wanted to come. In the end the rogue and i just gave up, and later that night i asked a 70 warrior guildmate if he'd run it with me tomorrow and he agreed.

In conclusion: it seems like the only way to get a party together is either have a very large guild with lots of people online so you can always organise something, or have high level friends.

Also, im playing on a low populated server (Nagrand) so that might have something to do with it.

/opinion

level 52 Human Warrior

In this initial post, the author includes several key qualifiers and explanations of purpose that will help other message board participants respond meaningfully to the problem. The author includes the particular instance/dungeon in question and recounts the act of using the “Looking for Group” interface to find other players interested in the same instance. The author also includes the server that he/she plays on and an assessment of the server’s overall population.

The author does not present a question for other message board participants to respond to, but seems to be inviting commentary on the difficulty of finding groups. The author proposes two necessary conditions for having regular access to groups: being in a “very large guild with lots of people online” or having “high level friends.”

According to this author, the interface is not at fault in the difficulty of finding groups; the author recounts the ease of using the interface to find another character at an appropriate level with the same goal. The problem seems to be a socialization issue; by comparing the process of ad hoc grouping to the pre-existing social group (i.e., guild) that the author is used to playing with,

the author exposes the disconnect between the potential for grouping and the reality of player participation. In the end, the author returns to his/her own guild network as a reliable source of cooperative gameplay but is still interested in finding possible ways that ad hoc grouping could work better.

The replies are somewhat discouraging, but most point to contextual features that result in the failure of this specific attempt to find a group, rather than indicting the activity of grouping as a whole. Two replies agree with the initial post in identifying low population as a reason for the group’s failure: “I also played on Nagrand TC, and I can tell you that it has a horrible population size and i played on horde which has something like 2-3 times more people than alliance.” The other notes, “Low pop it's hard to find people. Also, the closer you get to Outland level entry (58) the less chance you'll find someone. You'll have an easier time finding a group for SM than Scholo, I'm sure of it” [19]. Two replies point out that the Sunken Temple is generally an undesirable instance and not worth players’ time: “I only ever go to ST to collect the feathers/use the altar and whatnot” and “Sunken Temple is one of those instances people run only if they absolutely have to” [19].

In the system of texts and interactions that are involved in grouping, the message board represents a collection of localized conversations concerned with specific problems or experiences with grouping that players wish to share and receive responses to. The Grouping FAQ represents a *consolidation* and *abstraction* of these localized experiences, building a stable text that draws from player knowledge and serves as a centralized paratext for players to use in their grouping activities. By stable, I mean that the text is always accessible in the same place (it will not get buried under a chronological organization if not contributed to, as message board threads do) and is crafted iteratively by a single author. The FAQ is a good starting point for players who experience problems with grouping or who want general information on group strategies. The message board, in part, becomes a space where more specific problems and strategies can be discussed, ones that cannot be addressed adequately in a generalized document. However, neither of the specific grouping texts referenced here are suited for beginning players who have never been in a group; both are generated out of pre-existing group experience and its concomitant difficulties and successes. The group interfaces, as well as the socialization experience of grouping, are thus interactions that influence the production of these paratexts, as illustrated in the message board post’s narrative about grouping.

4. CONCLUSIONS

By looking at the activity of grouping in *World of Warcraft*, this article attempts to identify the systems of texts and interactions that players use in their social gaming lives. As an activity, grouping plays a crucial role in how players communicate, network, and build and maintain personal connections in the virtual social space of *World of Warcraft*.

The writing that players produce in response to problems that arise in the game serves as an interesting parallel to other professional and technical writing studies—for example, Clay Spinuzzi’s activity-theoretic study of how genre innovations happen in the workplace [14]. One of the implications that I have decided to leave to be explored further in future work is the issue of motivation. By unpacking what motivates players to do

extensive technical writing production on their own, we might be able to take away insights to apply to professional/technical writing and online communication work. This is especially true for studying online or hybrid online-offline communities where writing in virtual spaces replaces interactions that would normally happen in a common physical space.

Another implication of this study that could be examined is how players actually read the FAQ. Genre conventions such as the use of unique “codes” for each section allow the reader to jump immediately to a particular section. This suggests that players ignore most parts of the text in favor of locating small pieces of relevant information. However, other FAQs such as the Grouping FAQ seem to be designed to be read in a more linear fashion from start to finish. Also, the “walkthrough” as a particular kind of game document can be used in both ways; it is designed for players to use as a companion text as they play so they don’t miss things along the path of the game. Players can also use it, though, for moment-to-moment hints when they get stuck. Doing more extended work in this area to examine usability issues can bring out the implications for how readers read certain kinds of electronic text and how that matches up with different activity systems.

Returning to the games and learning conversation, there is also the potential of digital games (and other game-like systems such as role-playing scenarios and simulations) to help teach technical writing. For example, Nancy Coppola has written about the efficacy of digital games in teaching an online technical writing course, noting that the particular gaming context she put into use “provides active learning, extends from students’ preconceptions and previous knowledge, and provides hands-on learning” ([1], p. 44).

One last implication is how the FAQ writing community itself uses social systems of feedback and peer review. These communities, like many fandom-based communities, have arisen out of personal interest rather than establishment by a controlling institution, yet they often employ extensive and stringent processes of peer review and critique. Related to this issue is the entire economy/ecology of texts involved in the FAQ writers’ community. Standards of FAQ authorship, citation, and value influence what kinds of texts get produced and which ones are determined as worthy of publication. In this article, I have covered only a small part of gaming activity in only one game; as I have indicated here, there is much more to be explored and much more we can draw out of the design and use of digital games for other kinds of work.

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