Understanding Social Interaction in World of Warcraft

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ABSTRACT

Research has argued that social interaction is a primary driving force for gamers to continue to play Massive Multiple Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). However, one recent study argues that gamers don't really socialize with other players but play alone. Part of the confusion over whether players socialize much and/or enjoy socializing while playing MMORPGs may be due to the lack of a conceptual framework that adequately articulates what is meant by 'social interaction in MMORPGs to understand how users experience interactions within the game. This study utilized ethnography to map out social interaction within the game World of Warcraft. It provides a broad framework of the factors affecting social interaction. The framework developed can be further verified and modified for future research.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [**Computing Milieux**]: Personal Computing - Games; J.4 [**Computer Applications**]: Social and behavioral sciences

General Terms

Human Factors, Languages, Theory

Keywords

Social interaction, Social computing, MMORPG

1. INTRODUCTION

Social interaction in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) contributes to a large part of players' gaming experience. Griffiths, Davies & Chappell [9] found players' favorite aspect of the game is social interaction (41%). Yee [15] found that 39.4% of male gamers and 53.3% of female gamers felt their MMORPG friends were comparable or better than their real-life friends. Social interaction is also found as a key factor that makes gamers become more engaged and play the game continuously [3]. However, a recent study on World of Warcraft [7] suggested that

players spend most of their time playing by themselves rather than interact with other players.

Part of the confusion over whether players socialize much and/or enjoy socializing while playing MMORPGs is due to the lack of a conceptual framework that adequately address social interaction in MMORPGs'. Therefore, this study explores patterns of social interaction within a popular MMORPG: World of Warcraft (WOW). It aims to provide insights for better understanding of social interaction within the game. It is a stepping stone for more future research to fully develop a framework for social interaction in MMORPGs.

2. SOCIAL INTERACTION IN MMORPGs

2.1 Research problems

Ducheneaut & Moore [6] studied players' popular social gestures in Star Wars Galaxies. Ducheneaut, et al. [7] developed a custom application that takes a census of the game world every 5 to 15 minutes in 4 WoW servers. They found that players prefer playing alone rather than interact with other players. Some other researchers have quantified the importance of social interaction in gaming through survey questionnaires [10, 15].

Jakobsson & Taylor [10] compares the social networking in Everquest to popular conceptions of Mafia networks as portrayed by the TV show The Sopranos. They found that social networks within the game Everquest bear a striking similarity to the classic mafia stereotype. Steinkuehler [13] performs discourse analysis on language gamers use to discern the forms of life and the way Lineage gamers identify himself within the larger Lineage community. Castronova [2] also conducted an ethnographic study of Everquest to outline the forms of economic activities.

None of the studies can adequately articulate what "social interaction" is in MMORPGs. This exploratory study addresses this under-investigated area by asking two research questions: What are the factors that affect social interaction in WOW? What are different forms of social interaction in WOW?

2.2 Theoretical assumptions

In WoW, players interact with one another through their in-game avatar. The game environment presents a stage for players to literally play out their symbolic selves [8]. In order to understand the symbolic construction of players within the game, symbolic interactionism theory [1] is applied as a guiding conceptual

approach. Symbolic interactionism studies how individuals create symbolic meanings through their interactions with other people. It posits an individual's capacity for self-reflexive behavior allows him/her to attempt different roles in social interaction.

An individual's self-conception is therefore reconstructed by each interaction with an Other. Individuals invest symbolic meanings into these interactions to make them socially real. In the process of meaning-making, individuals use language to communicate and interpret meanings. Through constant symbolic interpretation of their interaction with others, individuals are able to understand who they are and how to function in a society. It is through the framework of the Self-Other interaction, theorists are able to understand the process of social interaction. Corresponding to the theory, a qualitative research is design.

3. METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of previous research on the various forms of social interaction in WOW, this study employs a qualitative approach. The strength of qualitative method is to make sense of under-studied areas. It can obtain rich and in-depth data to inform research.

The authors conducted virtual ethnography for a period of a year, from December 2005 to 2006. Both researchers spent on average 2-3 hours in one sitting, 3-4 hours a day, 6-7 days a week in WOW to observe and interact with other gamers on an American server. Although many players live in the U.S., researchers also have frequent interaction with players from Canada, Australia, Singapore, and Britain. The server is a player v.s. player server where you can fight with anther player in the contested area in WOW.

Researchers have leveled up their characters to the highest level possible. They have explored all the geographical areas and engaged in gaming activities that require only single player, 5-men group, 10-men, 20-men and 40-men raid group. One of the researchers has played a leadership role in a guild of approximately 80 players. Taking leadership role in a guild enjoys privileges other plays do not have, such as grant guild membership, distribute in-game resources, give command in raid…etc.

Particular attention was paid to the forms of language used during interactions and the "epiphanic moments" [4] in WoW. Epiphanies "radically alter and shape the meanings which people assign to themselves and their life projects" [4]. Data collected include 87 screenshots, 10 video of in-game events, 350 pages of in-game dialogue and field notes.

Data analysis was guided by theoretical framework discussed above as well as Lincoln and Cuba's [12] constant comparison method. They recommended "unitizing and categorizing…units of information," in order to systematically arrive at emergent themes and categories. "Unitizing" is assigning a meaning and value to an idea that is the "smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself" [12]. Categorizing process starts with grouping similar ideas identified during utilizing process into one category. The criteria for grouping are on a "look-alike feel-alike basis" [12]. The common themes represent patterns observed in the data. It illustrates "the underlying existential structures of a relationship or situation" [4].

The next section presents data analysis from two aspects: factors influencing social interaction and the patterns of social behaviors. To understand possible factors that influence social interaction within the game, concepts derived form symbolic interactionism are adopted to analyze contextual and in-game factors in section 4.

Specifically, this study adapts the Self-Other framework discussed in section 2.2 to explore patterns of social interaction within the game world in section 5. The theoretical concepts have guided the unitizing and categorizing process.

4. FACTORS INFLUENCING SOCIAL INTERACTION IN WOW

4.1 Contextual factors

4.1.1 Historical Context
Based on Blumer's theory [1], social interaction in MMORPGs is viewed as a dynamic process of meaning-making occurring within a historical context and examinable through the analysis of in-game language and in-game joint actions of players. Players' gaming history, and the progression of the game server (a temporal factor) are two factors that can potentially influence social interaction.

4.1.2 Interactional Arena
In-game spatiality is important in the study of social interactions in MMORPGs [5]. From a symbolic interactionist approach viewpoint, interactional settings affect the way social interaction develops. In the presence of two or more actors, 'interactional settings' are transformed into 'interactional arenas' where meaningful symbolic exchange can take place [3]. Interactional arena helps study how in-game spatiality can influence social interactions.

4.1.3 Level of Social Aggregation
Kolo & Baur [11] in a study of Ultima Online, define levels of social aggregation in MMORPGs are: 1) the social micro-level of individual players. It could be the specific motivation to play or the strategy used; 2) the meso-level of social formations among players (for example, player clubs, offline events) or among characters (for example, guilds); 3) the social macro-level, spanned by the community of all MMORPG players.

4.2 In-game factors
There are two major factors built within the game design that influences social interaction within the game: instrumental joint acts and rules of conduct.

4.2.1 Instrumental Joint Acts
Symbolic interactionism argues that social structures are formed when many social actors experience and understand joint actions similarly thus developing 'collectivities' of joint actions such as marriage, trading transactions or church services. In the game world, joint actions are also observed. The term Instrumental Joint Acts refers to social interaction for instrumental purposes. These can be trading exchanges, crafting services or lockpicking services in WOW. These can also be "looking for group" broadcasts, finding players to finish tasks in the game, asking for directions, asking for help do fight with real players, or begging.

4.2.2 Rules of Conduct
According to Denzin [4] "rules of conduct … specify the dimensions and conditions under which the set of actions can be and will be carried out." Proposed categorizing rules of conduct are as follows: 1) Civil-legal rules. In WoW, this refers to official rules imposed by Blizzard, the game company. 2) Looting rules. They are rules that define how tangible items such as armor and weapons should be distributed in a group. 3) Guild rules. They define how member should behave in an organized group led by gamers. 4) Socializing

norms. In the game, people utilize in-game emoticons, jargons, abbreviations, and items to socialize with others. Norms are developed and learned. Players who violate those norms or fail to follow the norms will be considered as unskillful, inexperienced and disliked.

5. SOCIAL INTERACTION IN WOW
Different forms of social interaction in WOW can be understood by self-other dynamic. In a role-playing game, everyone can experiment forms of self-representation. The ways people express their views about others is another element that construct social interaction.

5.1 Self
5.1.1 Staging Oneself
Aspects of one's represented identity within the game stems interactions among gamers. To take on a role in the game, every player is conscious of the appearance of his/her own avatar in the game. Those include the gear wore and carried, class played, race, level (level relative to the location you are seen), player v.s. player rank, and gendered identity.

Players tend to "one-up the other" to show that they are good at the game. People often out brag each other by comparing what they have accomplished for their previous avatar without actual proof. There are many instances of such behavior where players try to up another's claim often in very unbelievable brags.

Players also tend to disclose certain aspects of real-life situations to others (e.g. sharing information on your age, education, place of resident…etc). Self-disclosure is typically very selective and partial.

5.1.2 Gaze
Gaze refers to the 'spectatorial' social element in WoW. It is a form of passive social interaction that involves 'glancing', 'looking' at the other or simply viewing the collective social activity taking place. It is also one of the most prevalent forms of interaction. Different forms of gaze include: 1) Watch out for players' status such as armor, character capability, and guild development; 2) Glance at the public. For example, watching others kill morbent fei, watching others duel each other in the main cities, watching players in ironforge dance naked…etc. 3) Screen for needs. This includes watching out for tips on quest locations, prices in trade channel, free give-away like enchantments. Those information are obtain through various text-based chat channels in the game.

5.1.3 Superiority
As the game is designed to be competitive, players often seek opportunities to show that they are better than others. Such behaviors include: 1) Authoritarian acts. For example, in a guild, guild leader can decide a player's status and privileges. In groups, some players tend to give unsolicited advice to others on how to play their in-game character. 2) Skill competition. People like to compare their skills in killing targets or making items in the game. A typical example is that players argue about strategies in a group situation. A mage instructed the group to kill multiple mobs in one go. Everyone in the group died. Another player, a rogue, then argued that it is best to kill them one by one and blamed the mage for stupid decision. 3) Familiarity with game/ characters. Players argue their character is stronger than the others (i.e;"paladin is better healer than priest") and how much they know about each role in game. Players also tend to show off tricks to complete tasks in game. 4) Self-

reinforcing encounters. These are social interactions that give one's self-conception an ego boost. Common forms of social interactions exhibiting this are helping low level players to finish their tasks faster and give away items to people who cannot obtain them.

5.2 Other
5.2.1 View of the individual other
Typically, encounters take in two forms: other-reinforcing encounters and labeling encounters. Other-reinforcing encounters are social interactions that boost the Other's self-conception. Common forms of such behavior includes giving people compliments on their gear and returning others' complements (e.g. "Dude, cool mace, where you got it?" or cheering others during player versus player duels… etc).

Labeling encounters are encounters of significance, where one actor is defined in a new novel and typically deviant ways [4]. Based on the field notes, examples include: 1) Whistle-blowing (e.g. So-so is a Chinese Gold Farmer; So-so is botting! Reported! So-so is corpse camping, that's lame); 2) Exclusionary (e.g. All American/Singaporean/Australian Guild…etc. racism; Don't group with so-so he has bad attitude…etc.); 3) Guild competition (e.g. So-so guild is the best guild on this server.)

5.2.2 View of the collective other
This refers to how a player views himself/herself relative to a larger community. Often the player shares a similar attribute with the 'collective Other' which defines him/her as part of the group. These attributes may be race, guild or a common group goal. When the relationship is positive, there is a sense of belonging. Players view oneself as part of the 'collective other' and place group's needs and goals above one's own goals and needs. They would turn down real-life commitments to play with a group/guild they belong to. They would give up items to others who need it more than themselves.

When the relationship is negative the players finds oneself in the renegade club. Players view oneself as distinct or excluded from the 'collective other' and place one's needs and goals above group's goals and needs. Group deviant behaviors would be observed. (e.g. threatening to leave in the middle of a fight if certain conditions aren't met; abusive language used on others or frequent guild switching behaviors…etc).

With regards to how aforementioned factors influence social interaction, it is found that historical context influences gamers' desire to keep on playing in a given sever, a given guild, and interact with certain (type of) players. The depth and breath of social interaction change as the game server matures (temporal factor). There are qualitative differences in the kind of social interactions occurring in different regions within WoW (interactional arena/ spatial factors). Level of social aggregation usually influences the topic and nature of the conversation. Superiority, sense of belonging, and the renegade club occurs at the meso level while other forms of social interaction occurs at the macro and micro level However, the change of the game features can also change the dynamic. Findings on how in-game social interactions in MMORPGs can be studied is graphically presented in Figure 1.

6. CONCLUSION
This study maps out the different forms of social interaction and explains the different factors that influence social interaction within

WOW. It understands social interaction through a self-other relationship. Previous quantitative research was limited by game features and did not take into account spatial and temporal factors. Research of this type may obtain different outcomes depending on where and when researchers start their research. Therefore, studies of social interaction should take into account that interactional settings, historical context may influence the type of social communication/ interaction that occurs within the game. This study is part of a series of research project on social interaction within MMORPG. Further research will focus on validating and modifying the current framework by quantitative measures.

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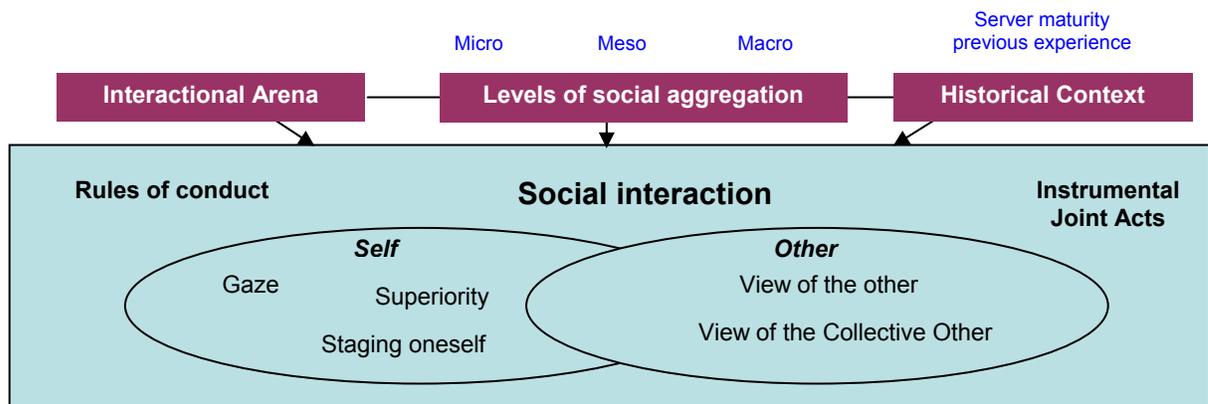
Figure 1. Social interaction in WOW