

Don't Feed the Trolls!

An Analysis of Reactions to Rudeness in the World of Warcraft

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Introduction

In November of 2004, the MMORPG game *World of Warcraft* was released. Though not the first of its kind, the game was an instant hit. After roughly four months from the release date the game had sold a staggering 1.5 million subscriptions (Nich, 2005). From there, the popularity of *World of Warcraft* continued to climb, reaching over 9.6 million accounts worldwide as of 2013 (Stickney, 2013).

Researchers have centered their studies on one of the key, defining characteristics of MMORPG games like *World of Warcraft*: social collaboration. Studies on player motivation have concentrated on the considerable social, community-based, attraction factors, such as the relationship-based reasons of female play versus the more achievement-centered reasons for male play (Yee, 2007). Even when expanded to the more broad plain of RPG games and increasing the number of motivation factors, research still displayed relationship/social incentive in the top four motivations (Tychesen, Hitchens & Brolund, 2008). An ethnographic study specifically focused on the social climates of guilds (organizations in MMORPG games made up of multiple players) found that a certain level of social capital is carried within this game structure, perpetuating social motivations (Williams et al., 2006). All conducted studies have independently found that a substantial attraction in such MMORPG games is the social aspect. Given the importance of social aspects of the game, more research is needed on in-game social behaviors. *World of Warcraft* is a fascinating landscape for exploring how people relate to one another in an anonymous context. Players can engage with others

across the globe, interacting in various activities that range from merely chatting to dueling one another in PvP to working together in raids, guilds, and dungeons. One can choose to work with others towards one purpose or adversely fight others. The characteristic social aspects of *World of Warcraft* are highly integrated into the structure and culture of the game itself.

Questions about player social behavior have been beginning surface. Are people more apt to be friendly, reclusive, or rude inside the game? Does in game interaction translate to real world behavior? This study specifically focuses around in-game “rudeness”. Rudeness, as defined in context of MMORPG gameplay, is the act of offending other players. This can translate into many different actions such as ninjaing (a player who, when in a group, rolls “Need” on every item regardless of whether he or she can use it), collective self-interest in dungeons/raids, discourteous chat dialogue, trolling, and general spamming.

Previous studies have focused on rudeness in the form of trolling (someone who posts inflammatory or off-topic messages with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response). One study explored the relationship of cyber-bullying and trolling, reaching the conclusion that under the HRSA definition of cyber-bullying, trolling in fact did meet the criteria (Dreiling, 2011). Another study covered the “mechanics” of trolling, using internal and external methods for collecting data (Webberley, 2011). It came to the conclusion that cyber bullying (according to academic definitions) is highly prevalent within the *World of Warcraft*, yet most WoW players do not define it as such. A gap was left in both research studies regarding the recipient’s reactions to such trolling. Another void of data

analysis was perpetuated by the narrow focus on just trolling. This study expands the sphere of trolling to overall in-game rudeness, posing questions concerning people's reaction to it.

Methods

To conduct our research, three primary methods were used. The first was interviewing players both in-game and out. Detailed accounts of in-game rudeness were recorded and categorized into trends and patterns. Both the official *Word of Warcraft* battle.net forums and Wowhead forums were searched for posts recounting in-game rudeness and how the poster dealt with it. One forum post, sent out by a researcher asking for how people responded to rudeness, provided data that was used in this study as well. The final source of data was a survey collectively put out onto the Internet by a group of undergraduate researchers.

The survey questions were compiled by 45 students in a first-year writing and research course at a private university in the Western United States to address a descriptive research question about the attitudes and practices of World of Warcraft players. The anonymous survey was administered through the Qualtrics application, and a link was posted on select Internet forums and Twitter. The survey was kept active for 1 week and had 582 usable responses (excluded responses included those who reported under 18 years of age and respondents who did not complete the majority of the questionnaire).

One-on-one in-game interview research was the main method used to obtain qualitative data. Players of level 70 or higher were interviewed. The researchers

approached them and said, "Hello, I am conducting research for a university and was wondering if I could ask you a few questions." With a common introduction statement, there could be a level of consistency across the interviewees. If they obliged, they were screened with the broad question, "Have you ever experienced in-game rudeness?" If the interviewee answered "yes" to the question, researchers asked them a question along the lines of, "Can you recall a specific time a player was rude to you? What they did, how it made you feel, and how you reacted?" As the interviewee responded, details were probed for and if multiple instances could be recollected in order to collect a rich scope of data, the interviewee was asked to elaborate.

In addition, WoW online discussion forums were scanned to find more data describing players' experiences with rude gamers and how they responded to the rudeness. Sifting through forums, with titles on the topic of rudeness, helped gather players' opinions on how they handle such instances. The keywords used to find posts were "rude", "mean", "troll", and "ninja" because they are the most popular phrases used in the WoW community to describe a rude player.

The cumulative analysis of all of the results from forums and interviews were inductively coded to find trends and common response patterns. These responses were placed into three main categories, each with several subcategories for further classification and clarity.

Results

The Questionnaire

The data collected from a question on a broad survey, on how many people mentioned rudeness in a question about in-game pet-peeves, is categorized by the keywords used to find the players that mentioned other players' actions in their answer. The resulting responses from a question about in-game "pet-peeves" were coded using five "rudeness" categories.

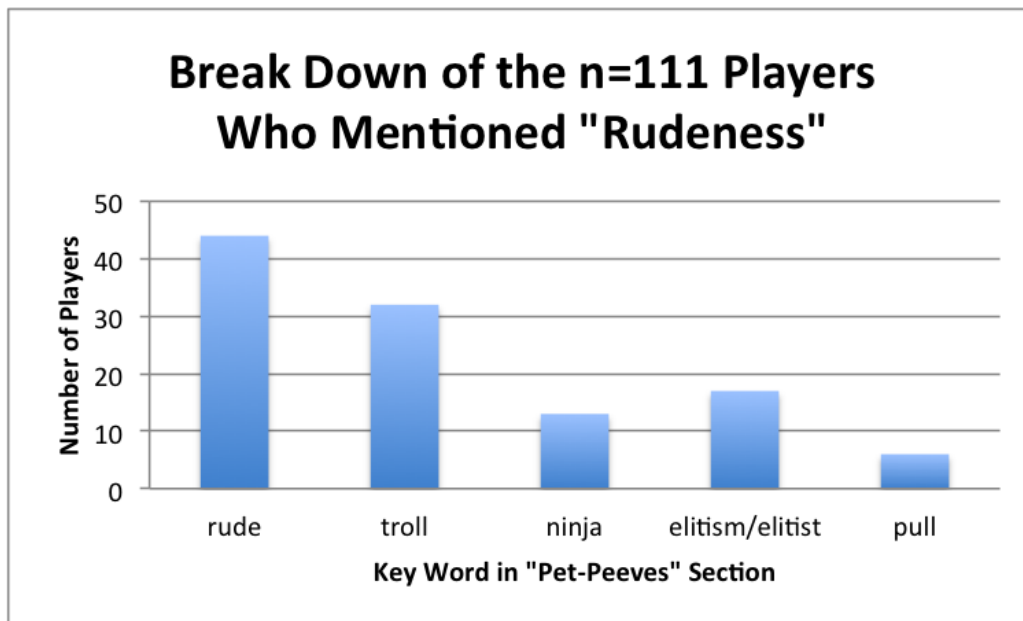


Table 1. Out of the N=584 surveyed, n=111 responded mentioning at least one of the five key words in the context of "rudeness". This table is a sampling of the prevalence of each word and how it adds up to the n=111 total number of players.

The survey data shows that when asked an open ended question about pet-peeves roughly 19% of the players polled suggested that the rude actions of other

players bothers them the most. There are many factors that can contribute to player pet-peeves inside of the game of WoW. Almost 20% of the players who filled out the questionnaire mentioned that rudeness, to some extent, could be considered a nuisance to them.

Interviews and Forum Posts

There were several trends picked up through researching in forums and interviewing players, both in-game and out. Through these mediums, three broad response patterns were noted with different specific subcategories. The results of responses are therefore categorized into three sections passive response, verbal response, and active non-verbal response. Each section has an explanation of the reaction type and quotes from players that illustrate these points most clearly.

Many of these player responses were not only when the rudeness directly affected them, but also when they witnessed meanness as a third-party observer. Intervention most commonly happened with these third parties in dungeons and raids in which the mean actions directly inhibited the pleasure of their game play as they attempted to complete a goal.

Ignoring.

By far the most common response, this style of reacting to rudeness involved the least effort and is the least confrontational approach. Those players who chose to use the “/ignore” feature in the chat box no longer saw anything typed from the respective player whose name followed it. Mozza, in a forum post, said, “/ignore and

move on” when asked about how she handled rude behavior. In a virtual world, it is most easy to put the mute on or walk away from the situation.

When a post in the Blizzard forums asked about how people deal with rudeness, 13 of the 22 responses either directly or indirectly stated that ignoring those bothersome players was the best choice that involved the least amount of grief. One forum poster, Leiah, suggested to “invest in a thicker skin” or Shenanagins said, “don’t sweat the small stuff.” Zirconia, a 26-year-old female had this story to share:

Well... When I was freshly 90 I was tanking heroic scholomance because of my inexperience I pulled a group as well as the boss and we ended up taking a lot of damage. I got told that I was ‘the worst tank ever’. I kind of grinned and bared it. Just kept going and in the end we finished the entire instance. It was pretty disheartening though.

In a virtual world where most people come to escape and find comfort, the simple act of ignoring someone can go a long way. This was most likely the most common response from players due to a desire to stay stress free and continue on their questing or other activities. With the least amount of effort put into engaging trolls or general meanness, ignoring was an effective way players avoided sticky situations with others and kept enjoying the game for what it is.

Verbal response - *Reasoning.*

Some people chose to engage the other rude players. Those that choose to do so have been set into several subcategories. Those being discussed here use a logical and levelheaded approach to dealing with a raging, angry, mean, or rude player. This style of dealing with a standoffish player used a logical retort to either counter the

argument or get them to at least settle and quiet down slightly. Many of the players who said that this is how they handle these situations also suggested that they do it for their own amusement and find that “poking holes” in the other person’s argument to be pleasurable. One player who posted on a forum, Miresong, had this to say about using a reasoning approach:

I handle trolls/rudeness with calm and logic. If you keep pointing out how their rhetoric doesn’t work half the people out there will run into the wall before they finally start screaming.

Once they start [screaming] the timer is set before they do something really stupid and reportable. All for just replying in sane conversation and questioning the route they took to get these conclusions.

This was an example of using logic to possibly result in that player being reported to Blizzard. A player could be reported for many things and means that Blizzard will intervene and determine the fate of a player. That player could be banned, suspended, or nothing at all may happen. There are other ways to use calm and logic with a softer and nicer approach. This also falls under the category of reasoning, but ends with the rude player hopefully coming to a realization of his or her actions and quieting down or even apologizing. This tactic was less common and used mostly by people who want everyone to get along and usually have a pleasant run through a dungeon or raid.

Humor.

There were several reports from interviews and forums posts of players who used humor to get mean players to calm down and keep to themselves a little more.

This approach allowed for the receiver of the humorous comments to realize that the sender is attempting to defuse the situation in a light way that won't lead to arguments or anyone getting emotionally hurt.

The most common form of this was for the player to use childish language or silly substitutions for curse words or profanity. Herseypie wrote on a forum, "I always find making silly curses actually calms people down and they are less likely to nerdrage and pillage my house." This was a clear example of using humor to avoid an unpleasant confrontation and make it into something less harmful.

Titsundi had a humorous or light way of dealing with players in dungeons who are pulling aggro (making all of the NPCs attack them) over the tank: "When tanking, if I see a paladin stealing aggro... I will say, 'Hey. Hey you with the face. You are righteous. Stop that. Stop that right now!' They generally get the idea and turn it off". By approaching angry players with this attitude and mentality, there was a moment where he/she can step back and realize how upset he/she was over something small. Herseypie also did note that there are some people who just enjoy arguing and ignoring them may be the best strategy.

Fight fire with fire.

Most players, 21 out of 22 who posted on a forum on the topic of dealing with rudeness, did not choose to engage other mean players in aggressive verbal contact, but it has been known to happen, and more frequently than expected. When a player shaves away at the nerves of another, a battle of words ensues. Through in-game researcher experience, this most often happened with repeat offenders who

continually ninja or troll even when politeness has failed. Very often in dungeons, if a player refused to listen to the others in the instance, he/she will be (not so nicely) asked to leave or stop with whatever rude behavior was upsetting those in the group. Tucker, in an interview, admitted, "I will express my anger verbally through the chat feature either cussing them out or verbal abuse". Where humor used childish language to defuse tension, aggression used the real curse words and angry verbal abuse to get through to the mean player.

There was one clear problem with this: trolls. When a player is mean, rude, or did anything mean to others to elicit a response, trolls love it. So, when players engaged with a troll and got angry and upset themselves, they were "feeding the troll" and would lead to gratification of the player and only fed fire to their rampage of rudeness.

Some players pretended to be angry back with the instigator of the rudeness to make them feel as if they are getting a response. Septixe said in a forum:

Generally I find nerd raging back at them usually cools them off, gives them a good laugh and gives them the chance to have some fun by saying 'umadbro' hen really I'm not because I'm calm as a ducky, but as far as he knows I'm mad as a bull, and then he gets a good laugh and usually continues with the dungeon.

With this style of response the main focus was to allow the instigator to feel a sort of success and turn around and ask why the other player was so upset. The success rate of these response styles seems to be rather inconsistent. They were more focused on making the target of the rudeness feel better than defusing the situation for everyone involved.

Active non-verbal response - *Vote-to-kick*.

This feature is available in dungeons and raids and is a tool for players to use to remove another player from the instance for any reason. This feature is quite important in the context of non-verbal response. It is punishing enough to the rude player that he/she may decide to be a little nicer next time he/she enters an instance and it is not so harsh that the player that initiated the kick feels as if they have ruined the other player's day.

With the vote-to-kick, a player can voice his issues with the subject of the kick to the others in the group without him/her knowing. There is the possibility of people in the group not agreeing with the player's vote-to-kick, which can lead to an awkward rest of the dungeon/raid. However, it can at least allow the player to feel as if something was done about the issue and now the others in the group are aware. Tucker also stated in an interview that, "...I've kicked [players] out of the group several times..." This was a common practice, as it tended to make dealing with difficult players much easier. This was a significantly less devastating punishment than reporting the player to Blizzard for rudeness.

Reporting.

The action with the most long-term effects is reporting a rude player to Blizzard. A player can only be punished by Blizzard if they are violating something from the Terms of Service agreement. General bantering and rudeness is not something that Blizzard can do anything about. However, using severe language, spamming, or griefing can lead to player being banned from the game for a certain

period of time or even indefinitely. When a player chose to report another player for rudeness, they understood that there must be a drastic enough reason. Many players admitted to reporting others mostly when they were spamming chats.

Discussion

This research hopes to help analyze the reactions of player to rudeness within the game of *World of Warcraft*. After an analysis of player responses gathered through forums and interviews, three types of reactions were coded. The aim of these results are to help other researchers understand how WoW players choose or choose not to engage a “rude” player. The results of the research show that there are several strategies in the game that players choose to use to combat rudeness of other players. Using verbal, non-verbal, and passive responses, a player may avoid or engage those pesky, rude players and make their own overall playing experience more enjoyable.

This research holds significance in that there is now a general schematic for players’ reactions to rudeness. There is a categorical analysis that can be used as reference to help understand other research such as why certain styles of trolling are most effective in the game (Dreiling, 2011). It can be used, to help identify whether or not trolling truly is cyber bullying as it affects the emotions and mind of other players (Webberley, 2011). The way one chooses to react to another rude player is insight into how they truly feel about the situation.

The limitations on this work were quite noteworthy. There were many players that when asked to answer questions for an interview declined. The spectrum of players was limited in this study by compliance. Those who posted on the forums about rudeness were a small sampling of the *World of Warcraft* community. It is safe to state that this research only reacted and received responses from a miniscule percentage of actual active players.

There could very well be a correlation between virtual reactions and how people choose to handle conflict in the real world. However, there is no conclusive evidence of this sort, posing the research question, "Do people react the same in a virtual world to conflict, as they do in the real world?" This data does not suggest an answer to any such trend, but does beg to have the question asked.

With the way players are reacting, there is also a posing question on ethics and whether or not a player should stand up for a random stranger or simply remain quiet. A lot can be said about reactions in-game and how it is effecting the world and how players interact. With a continuing trend towards rudeness, that some players would suggest is developing, is the overall virtual world going to become a hostile place?

These trends suggest that there are four main player types that could be found at one time or another. For people who choose to play *World of Warcraft* it is a warning that not all players are nice, nor are they all mean. There is a broad spectrum of players that stand out in the world, and an overwhelming number of players remain silent in the game. This poses yet another question of "what percent of players actually engage others?" There are no current studies that show how

many players are actually chatting with strangers, or anyone, on a constant basis. Those who do speak out, tend to stand out because their voices are quite possibly among the few.

Many players chose to react in multiple ways and were not solely responsive in one category. It is important to keep in mind that these were styles of reactions, not styles of players. As many will choose to react in different ways depending on their situation, or mood, other players and how they were reacting, and many other factors come into play when a player chooses to react the way that they do. This leaves room for another research question asking: “what situations make players react in the way that they do?” From this, more of the social game dynamic can be mapped and understood so that other researchers and players know what type of world they are getting themselves into.

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