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# PLEASE FEED THE TROLLS:

A study examining  
the most effective way  
to annoy players in



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## Introduction

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The study of social interaction is a large, broad subject. The general definition of social interaction, as described by Jonathan H. Turner in his book *A theory of social interaction*, states that social interaction is “any situation where the behaviors of one actor are consciously reorganized by, and influence the behaviors of, another actor, and vice versa” (13-14). Turner goes on to describe social interaction as being the most basic level of social organization, and thus he emphasizes the importance of studying interaction at its most basic level.

With the onset of the Internet and constant interconnectivity, however, this definition of social interaction has taken on an entirely new edge. The modern study of social interaction includes not only the basics (physical dialogue, telephonic conversations, written word, etc.), but it now includes such Internet-based interactive phenomena as Facebook, Twitter and even Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs.)

MMORPGs have become one of the most highly played game types in the world. *EverQuest*, though not the first MMORPG, is a fantasy-themed MMORPG that started in 1999 and paved the way for the modern perception of MMORPGs (Radoff). After *EverQuest* and a series of other less prominent games, social interaction within the gaming world was beginning to take on a flavor of its own. This gaming culture was most visible with the creation of another groundbreaking game in 2004: Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft*, often abbreviated as *WoW*.

*World of Warcraft* featured one of the most developed, exciting embodiments of a typical MMORPG: a huge gameplay world, character customization, quests, goals, achievements and a storyline. In 2011, *WoW* has seen updates and game expansions, though the general gameplay remains the same: players create characters, receive experience points for quests, join guilds with friends and strangers and partake in an overall goal to level up while having fun with friends.

This element—having fun with friends and strangers alike—is the basis for any study of social interaction within *WoW*. Though recent studies have sought to explore the world of social interaction in online gaming, no effort has been made to specifically define the cultures and norms behind specific gamer types. This leads to room for specific research.

Thus, this study looks not at discussing the entire virtual world; instead, it aims to understand one subculture of the overall virtual social culture. There are many subcultures to study—anything from hardcore gamers, noobs, grinders, role players, tanks and countless others. Yet, one of the most intriguing of these subcultures is that of the “troll.” Trolls, as a general definition, are any players who intentionally incite, aggravate and contribute to frivolous or combative debate on online game chat or forums. Trolls are viewed as a generally negative influence in the online social world, but their presence is still something worth examining.

Instead of defining the trolls as a whole, however, this study looks to understand the mechanisms of trolling. Specifically, research was conducted throughout this study in order to understand whether trolling using internal (within

*WoW*) aggravating topics or external (outside of *WoW*) aggravating topics incites more “effective” (meaning prolonged) debate at the hands of the troll.

## **Methodology**

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As this study aims to understand which type of aggravator is more effective, the best methodology includes both quantitative and qualitative factors. Trolling is not something that can be measured strictly through numerical values; thus, it is necessary that an interviewing element be included in the research process. In knowing that this study was a mixed-method process, the following is the entirety of the research method.

In understanding the methodology, however, it is important to first understand the definitions of “external” and “internal” aggravators. An external aggravator, by the study’s definition, is any statement from a troll including inflammatory, irrational or outlandish ideas about anything outside of the game of *World of Warcraft*. As an example, an external aggravator could be any troll-like statement about national or world politics, religion, sports, race or feminism. These statements could be a negative or a positive view of whatever the subject may be, but the key is that they regard something unrelated to the *World of Warcraft*. Internal aggravators, on the other hand, regard any inflammatory statement about a subject or topic within the actual gameplay of *World of Warcraft*. An example of this would be anything about in-game races and classes, raid strategies, names or guilds. The key to internal aggravators is that they do not delve into anything non-*WoW*-related.

Ultimately, the most thorough comparison of the two types of trolling required both in-game tests and an out-of-game survey. Both are explained in the following passages.

### **In-game study**

There was a complicated process behind choosing a quantitative examination of the effectiveness of trolls' internal aggravators versus their external aggravators. In order to test the effectiveness of each, a statement (either deemed "internal" or "external" based on its content) was made over the trade chat channel in a congested area of the game. As players responded to the original statement, the researcher proceeded to encourage debate, albeit through a troll-like combative manner. The resulting debate was then logged using the /chatlog function within the game. Later, the researcher went back and counted all comments stemming from or related to the original aggravating statement. From this, it is assumed that the type of aggravator that ultimately induced the highest number of responses from the surrounding players is the aggravator deemed "most effective."

In that sense, some discussion must be given to the choice of topic for each type of aggravating statement. The external aggravating statement was required to be something that would elicit emotional debate within the surrounding area in relation to something outside of *WoW*. As sports were deemed too geographically based as to elicit debate, they were eliminated as a potential topic. Religion was considered, but ultimately it was eliminated on a basis of the potential for being banned from *WoW* and consequently ceasing the research. Thus, the final decision for an external topic was to initiate debate on something related to politics. Since

two of the most controversial people in the world of American politics right now are President Barack Obama and former Governor Sarah Palin, the resulting inflammatory external aggravating statement was the following: "All in favor of kicking Obama out of office, say AYE!! PALIN 2012!!! WHOO!" The internal aggravator was a more difficult choice. To criticize a person or group's raid or guild would surely incite some debate, but the discussion would not draw in a lot of players other than the ones being directly insulted. Therefore, the inflammatory statement needed to be one that would apply to many people and that would likely annoy them all. Thus, the researcher decided on a statement that would insult multiple players' names. The result was the following inflammatory internal aggravating statement: "Okay, guys, everyone's names around here suck. Seriously. Every single name I see around me is crap. Why don't you all start naming yourselves something intelligent...?" In both cases, the stereotypical presentation of "online-style" syntax was determined from the desire to avoid suspicion of the falsity of the researcher's truly non-troll status (otherwise known as "an attempt to blend in.")

The qualitative element of the in-game research consisted of a series of interviews. After presenting the aforementioned aggravating statements and aiding the arguments, one particularly angry/opinionated player would be singled out of the responders and "whispered" to within the game. After explaining her role as a student and asking for permission to interview, the researcher presented the players with a series of questions asking about why he or she was so angry about the argument and the trolling. These interviews were conducted in order to

understand the underlying reasons as to why either external or internal aggravators are more effective.

### **Out-of-game study**

As an additional supplement to the participant observational study conducted in the actual *World of Warcraft* game, an outside survey-based study was also conducted. Using the website SurveyMonkey.com, a survey consisting of ten questions (five demographic/unrelated questions and five specifically study-based questions) was taken by 64 *WoW*-playing people, 44 of which completed the entire survey. Three of the questions can be considered quantitative in nature and two are qualitative. Ultimately, this survey was conducted in order to act as an additional supplement to the main study.

## **Results**

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Results are separated by whether they were derived from the in-game study or from the out-of-game survey.

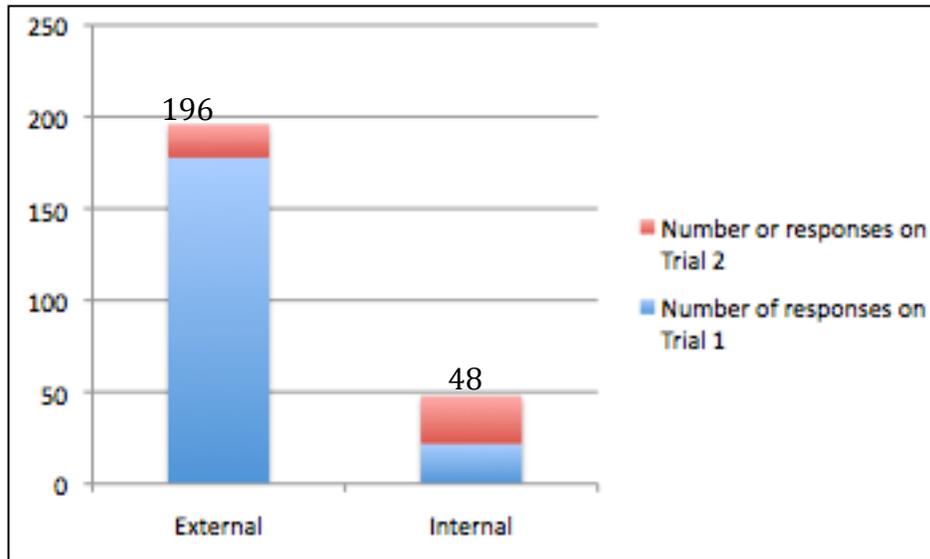
### **In-game study**

The in-game study presented interesting results, though further examination determines that they may have been caused by additional factors, which will be analyzed in the Discussion section to follow.

Nevertheless, the results for the in-game study included some expected results as well as quite a few unexpected ones. For example, the first area of interest involved the combined response count for either external or internal factors for each of the four trials. After performing the in-game trials, external aggravating

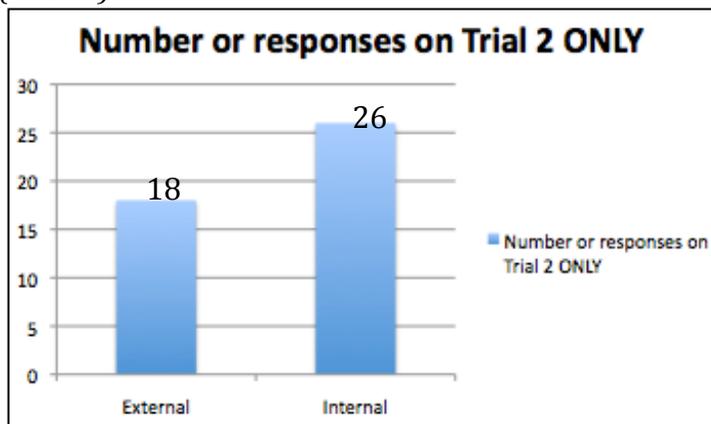
statements promoted more discussion (n = 196) compared to the internal aggravating statements (48) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Number of responses from external or internal aggravating statements



However, as this data seems to contain one outlier set of data in the number of external responses on Trial 1, another interesting take on the data is to view only the results from the second trials respectively. Viewed this way, the internal aggravating statement produced more debate (n = 26) compared to the external aggravating statement, which only generated 18 comments (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Number of responses from external or internal aggravating statements (Trial 2)

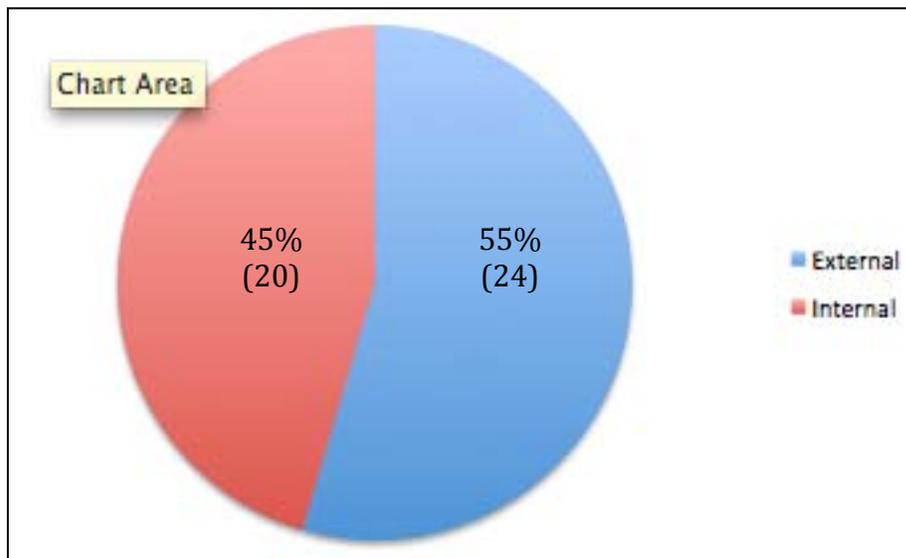


## Out-of-game study

The quantitative results of the survey are included here; however, the qualitative elements of the survey will be analyzed in the Discussion section to follow.

One of the questions in the survey asked directly: “Which is the more annoying way to troll: internally or externally?” In this case, 55% of the participants responded “External” ( $n = 24$ ) while only 45% (20) responded “Internal” (See Figure 3).

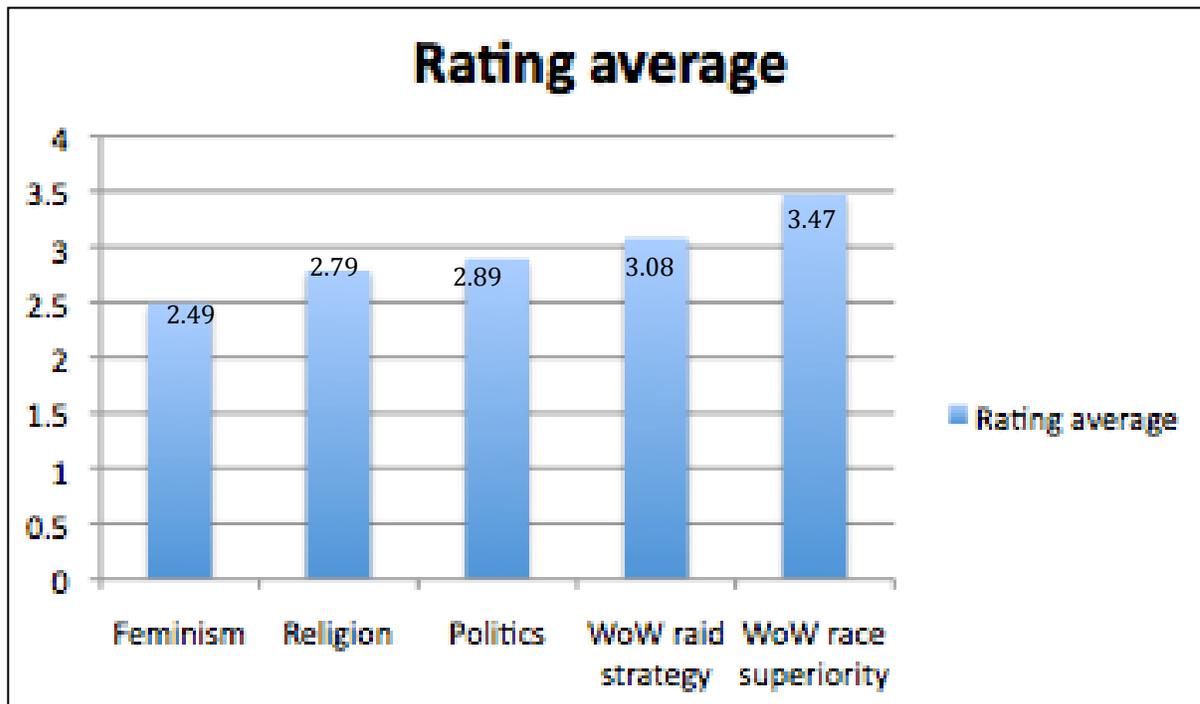
**Figure 3.** Which is the more annoying way to troll: internally or externally?



A later question asked participants to rate their likelihood to respond based on the troll’s subject matter. Given five options, they were asked to rank these in order of likeliness to respond; thus, lower scores indicate a higher likelihood of response while higher scores indicate a lesser interest. In this case, “Feminism” as a topic received the lowest mean score ( $M = 2.49$ ), indicating that it was rated the most likely to incite responses. “*WoW* race superiority,” on the other hand, received

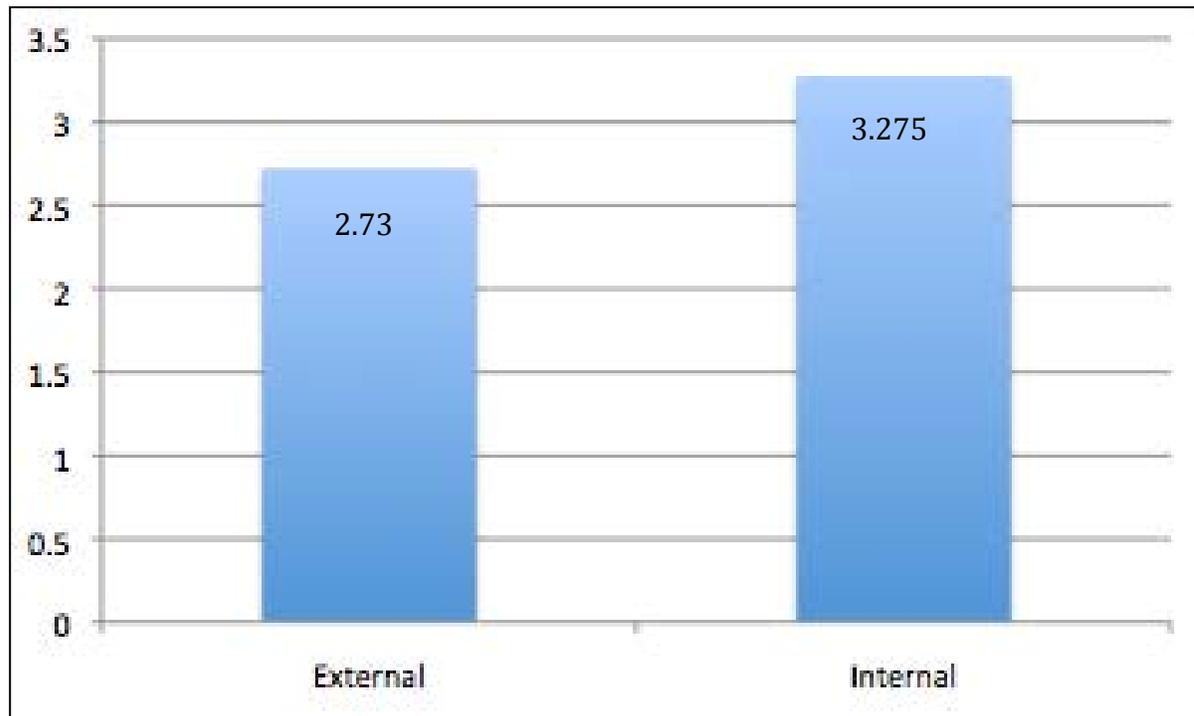
the highest mean score ( $M = 3.47$ ), thus demonstrating its role as the least likely topic to incite debate (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Please rate which of these you would be most likely to respond to if a troll was discussing it (low numbers are more likely to respond, high numbers are less likely, scale of 1 to 5)



Using the aforementioned information, these factors can be grouped based on whether they are considered external aggravators or internal aggravators. By this mindset, feminism, religion and politics can be described as external while *WoW* raid strategy and *WoW* race superiority can be described as internal. Thus, external factors received a lower mean score ( $M = 2.73$ ) than did internal factors ( $M = 3.275$ ), showing that external factors are rated as more likely to incite responses (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Average rating of likelihood to respond based on factors deemed “external” or “internal” (scale of 1 to 5)



## Analysis

The results in both halves of the overall research seem to indicate that external aggravators are ultimately the more effective choice when trying to troll in *World of Warcraft*, but not by a significant margin.

As the results of the in-game study demonstrate, external aggravators were definitely more effective in eliciting responses, commentary and anger; however, as mentioned in the Discussion section later, these results must be taken with a grain of salt. The majority of the responses demonstrating annoyance with external factors came from one day. This day may have been an outlier on the normal range of responses to external or internal factors, leading to the consideration of the data

without this one unusual day. If viewed without this data, the external aggravation is not much different from the internal aggravation, and based on the interviews from that day, a result of the interviewee's particular fondness for his own name.

In this sense, this data more closely reflects the results of the supplemental survey study. In the survey, when asked flatly as to whether internal or external-based trolling is more annoying, external trolling was still perceived as worse, but only by a matter of 10% of respondents (four people.) This, combined with the in-game results, once again reflects the research's ultimate conclusion: External aggravators are the more effective method of trolling compared to internal aggravators, but only slightly.

Within the survey, gamers were also asked to rank the likelihood that they would respond to a troll based on the troll's choice of topic. On a scale of one to five, with one being the most likely, gamers chose between feminism, religion, politics, *WoW* raid strategy and *WoW* race superiority. Feminism, religion and politics are all considered external aggravators, and each of these three was ranked at a lower average number than the combined internal aggravators (*WoW* raid strategy and *WoW* race superiority.) The external aggravators in this case received an overall average rating of 2.733 in comparison to the internal aggravators, which received an average rating of 3.275. Once again, the study shows that external aggravators are still considered more effective, though still at only a small margin.

Thus, if the ultimate conclusion in the numerical data is that external factors are slightly more effective than internal factors, further examination must be made to discover the exact reasons as to why this is true. In this sense, the qualitative

elements of the studies must be pursued in order to find further understanding overall.

Based on the responses within the survey as to why gamers believed that either external or internal trolling was worse, the respondents who believed that internal trolling is more effective generally reflected a belief that the trolls' rudeness and cruelty ended up ruining the in-game experience of the victimized players. This, they stated, ultimately makes internal trolling more annoying than external-related discussion. The personalization of trollish cruelty and the direct attacks on something that is supposed to be fun were recurring sources of animosity towards internal trolling, as demonstrated by two responses from participants of the survey: "It [internal trolling] insults people inside of a game that they pursued for enjoyment, not ridicule or antagonization" or "Because it makes rude comments about players or strategies that they often have no basis for, and are just saying it to hear (see) themselves talk." Aside from the personal element of internal trolling, the anti-internal trolling camp also overwhelmingly agreed on the fact that internal trolling resulted in more emotional responses than external trolling, as demonstrated from another two responses from participants of the survey: "The internal because you try hard to get your game play strategy right and if someone who doesn't necessarily know what they're talking about criticizes you that's more annoying than whether someone want to rant about some political thing that you really have nothing to do with" or "It [internal trolling] leads to an emotional response from the troll's target. Which in turn starts 'flame wars' and even more trolling."

Ironically, however, the emphasis of the fact that internal-related trolling evokes more emotional responses is strikingly similar to the reasons that the anti-external trolling respondents stated as their reasons for disliking external trolling more than internal. One respondent summed up this similar take on the fact that external trolling elicits emotional responses, saying: “External trolling generates more responses and anger. Internal trolling: ‘Character X sucks’, responses are usually short ‘bad gearlol’ ‘stood in in the fire’. While external, everyone has different views which leads to everyone calling everyone morons for their beliefs.”

While respondents agreed that both external and internal trolling elicits emotional responses in their victims, external trolling was set apart in the sense that an overwhelming majority of respondents added that one of the key reasons behind disliking external trolling is that it specifically distracts them from the *World of Warcraft*, both literally and figuratively “pulling them back” to reality in the outside world. Multiple responses distinctly demonstrated this dislike of reality, such as each of the following:

- “External comments (e.g. racist chat, derogatory comments) are less relevant to the game and more clearly trolling than, for instance, venting about a particular character class or something actually in *WoW*.”
- “Taking real life into a game just complicates things. People come here to relax, not to get trolled and bothered about real life issues.”
- “I come to Azeroth to rid my psyche of the taint society has expelled forth. Politics are bullshit, religion is bullshit and everything else related to the outside world is bullshit.”

- “Because it has nothing to do with the game whatsoever. If you're gonna play *WoW*, talk about it.”
- “External, because I hate it when someone brings up something unrelated to *WoW* and then says stupid things about it. People tend to enjoy being really radical/ignorant on *WoW*, and that's annoying.”

The combination of all this information helps to explain the idea that external aggravators are more annoying than internal ones, if only slightly. If using the overall rating of whether internal or external aggravators are more annoying (45% of responders to 55%, respectively), one can see that the 45% similarity between the two can be explained for a seemingly universal dislike of trolls' desire to elicit extreme emotional responses. The 10% of difference between the two can therefore be explained by citing the fact that those who dislike external trolling cited its tendency to pull its victims back into reality—something that many *WoW* players state is something that they specifically are looking to avoid while in the *World of Warcraft*.

## **Discussion**

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As with many studies, there is plenty of room for error and improvement within this particular research. For example, anything based in technology is prone to glitches, as demonstrated in the fact that the study suffered a secondary factor that may have altered its results overall: Patch 4.1. This patch both distracted chat while the researcher was trying to perform the in-game trolling study (possibly reflected in the first external aggravator test day, in which 178 responses were made, compared to the post-patch second day, in which only 18 responses were

made.) The extreme difference in results between the two external testing days indicates that some third factor—whether it was the patch or something different altogether—may have ultimately affected those results.

Also relevant to the subject of technical glitches, some room for error may have come from the fact that Patch 4.1 rendered the researcher's copy of *WoW* entirely inoperable for an extended amount of time after its release. This problem may also have altered the results overall.

In terms of room for improvement, any researcher interested in pursuing the matter of trolling further should consider controlling third variables as much as possible. For example, he or she might consider performing the in-game tests at the exact same time every day and in the exact same spot, thus eliminating some of the variables associated with time of day and with location. He or she might also consider tallying and analyzing response results based not only on sheer number of responses but instead on the number of unique responders and the number of times each specific player responds (rather than one mass number including all responses, even if it was only from two unique users.) In retrospect, a savvy researcher could also first build a reputation as a troll within the *WoW* realm, thus more closely matching the reputations of true trolls in later research. Notoriety, in this sense, may have altered results. The concrete nature of the aggravating statements may also have affected results. In the future, one might consider taking the opposite opinion of whatever happens to be discussed at the time and effectively trolling based on this. Once again, this is more accurate to the nature of a true troll. The in-game study could also have been improved if it had been conducted more times than it was.

Other than these things, there is also plenty of room for further investigation within *WoW* and MMORPGs in general. For example, researchers may consider an extended version of this research by specifically testing multiple specific factors (as opposed to just one statement deemed representative of all external or all internal aggravators.) In this sense, researchers could compare not only external versus internal but also religion versus politics versus *WoW* race superiority, etc.

There is also immense room for further understanding of all social interaction within the cyber world and MMORPGs specifically. As such a new technology, the forms of etiquette, understanding and social norms are still forming. In that sense, researchers are encouraged to document, study and understand each change in the social experience of the Internet as it happens. If this occurs, the world will be able to watch something it has never seen before: the creation of a worldwide virtual culture.

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