

Trolling and Harassment: Players' Responses in *World of Warcraft*

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Introduction

Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have captured the attention of gamers all across the world. This type of online video game allows many people to play at the same time. Of these games, *World of Warcraft*, also known as WoW, has been the leader in sales, with 7.1 million accounts globally (Statista, 2015). The game was released in November of 2004, and has had 5 expansions since then. It is the highest grossing video game of all time, and holds the Guinness World Record for most MMORPG subscribers (Langford, 2009). Additionally, *World of Warcraft* has captured an audience with a wide age range. Unlike most video games, 50% of players in *World of Warcraft* have a full time job and 36% of players are married (Yee, n.d.). The addictive nature of the game has helped it transpose the youth culture of video games. Without a doubt, *World of Warcraft* is a hit game.

World of Warcraft owes its success to many factors. Yee (2006) narrows its success down to four: social, community-based, attraction, and achievement-based factors. For the purposes of this study, I will specifically look into the social interactions of WoW. One of these interactions widely apparent in MMORPGS is trolling, or a type of harassment common on the Internet. When online, there is a chat interface in the bottom of the screen where nearby players can see anything someone wants to say. A text bubble also appears above the speaking characters head. While there is a filter on swearing in WoW, there is nothing to strain the trolls

from the chat interface. Furthermore, there is nothing to prevent players from non-verbal harassment. A player can chose to “ignore” a troll after they encounter him or her, but they cannot prevent the trolling from happening in the first place.



Figure 1: A WoW Text-Bubble

Forms of non-verbal harassment includes following, jumping next to someone repetitively, challenging to a duel multiple times, begging, farting and waving. As far as reasons why people troll, I asked WoW players by posting onto the official WoW forum page:

I just started playing, and there was this one player has been following me for a whole hour! He constantly spams me with duels after I still declined. He also dances around me when I stop moving! I ignored him of course, but I want to know if that has happened to anybody else. Why do people do that? Eight participants responded and the consensus was that trolls are lonely and have nothing to better to do. Granbeard, a level 100 Gnome Mage, said that trolls, “are just lonely and have no social skills.” Ghostfire, a level 100 Worgen Death Knight, agreed saying, “Happens every now and then. Some idiot who is by annoying you

until you duel him out of aggravation and stomp him like the cockroach he is. It gets easier to ignore when you learn to fly.” Both Granbeard and Ghostfire agree trolls are downright annoying. Players have countless ways of responding to annoying trolls. Weathervane, a level 100 Tauren Druid, said he tends to favor the following chat interface commands: /sigh, /golf clap, and /shoo.

Various studies have looked into the “troll” in *World of Warcraft*. One focused on whether trolling follows the official definition of a cyber bully, which it indeed was (Weberrly, 2011). Another focused specifically on trolling through forums, discovering that people tend to respond primarily with ignoring, then with talking smack (Bender-Samuel et al., 2013). Finally, another study delved into the most effective ways to troll someone, finding that talking about topics outside of WoW, like politics and sports, gets the highest amount of responses (Dreiling, 2011). However, there has yet to be an empirical report on various factors and the responses to trolling. In this study, I played the role of an annoying troll, and observed players while looking at a variety of factors.

Methods

Observational Study

For my study, I looked at several factors related to the different responses of trolls. The character I played was Hormouth, a level 20 Tauren Hunter (see Figure 1). I trolled 100 players from 5 different regions of *World of Warcraft*, all while playing in the Dragonmaw realm. The regions I played on were Mulgore, Northern Barrens, Durotar, Azshara, and Ashenvale. Each region is designed with a certain

level range in mind, although players of higher or lower level can sometimes be seen in those regions. My utilized methods of trolling include waving, dancing, following, farting, begging, repeatedly challenging to duel, and annoying players via the chat log. I also played across different times of day, due to the fact different players play at different times. New players may be online more in the morning, while hardcore gamers may play more at night. By playing across various hours of the day, I tried to reduce the lurking variable of time. I also recorded the hour and minute for each time I harassed someone, in order to see its effect; the WoW time in the Dragonmaw realm coordinates to the Central Time Zone. The variables I also took note of were race, class, and level. One thing to be noted, I played just in "Horde" regions of the game. While, I player can see an Alliance character in Horde regions, it is unlikely. The "Horde" is a faction of character races. The "Horde" consists of darker races like Orcs, Trolls, Blood Elves and more. The "Alliance" is the opposing faction of races that are generally labeled as good. The "Alliance" includes Humans, Night Elves, Gnomes and others. As a result of my regions, I only observed Horde races. In the end, I wanted to see if any the variables previously discussed had an effect on players' responses to my harassment.

Results

Observational Study

The results of my study found some interesting correlations between characters' race, class, level as well as the time of day, and the various responses to trolling (see Table 1 & 2). After looking at my qualitative data from each observation, I was able to categorize players' responses into 5 different categories: "Totally Ignored", "Imitation", "Told Me To Stop", "Acknowledged Then Moved On", and finally "Talked Smack Back". I looked at the correlation of race, level, class, and time of day, to the response rate of each category.

Table 1: Shows the lowest response rate per variable

Variable/ Response Category	Totally Ignored	Imitation	Told To Stop	Acknowledged Then Moved On	Talked Smack Back
Class	Priest 17%	Shaman 13%	Hunter 10%	Rogue, Warrior 8%	Monk, Death Knight 0%
Race	Troll 10%	Pandaren 12%	Pandaren 0%	Goblin, Pandaren 13%	Undead 0%
Level	(1-25) 15%	(76-100) 8%	(76-100) 8%	(76-100) 8%	(76-100) 0%
Time of Day	(19-24) 27%	(0-6) 15%	(13%) 23%	(7-12) 13%	(13-18) 6%
Total	28%	27%	17%	18%	9%

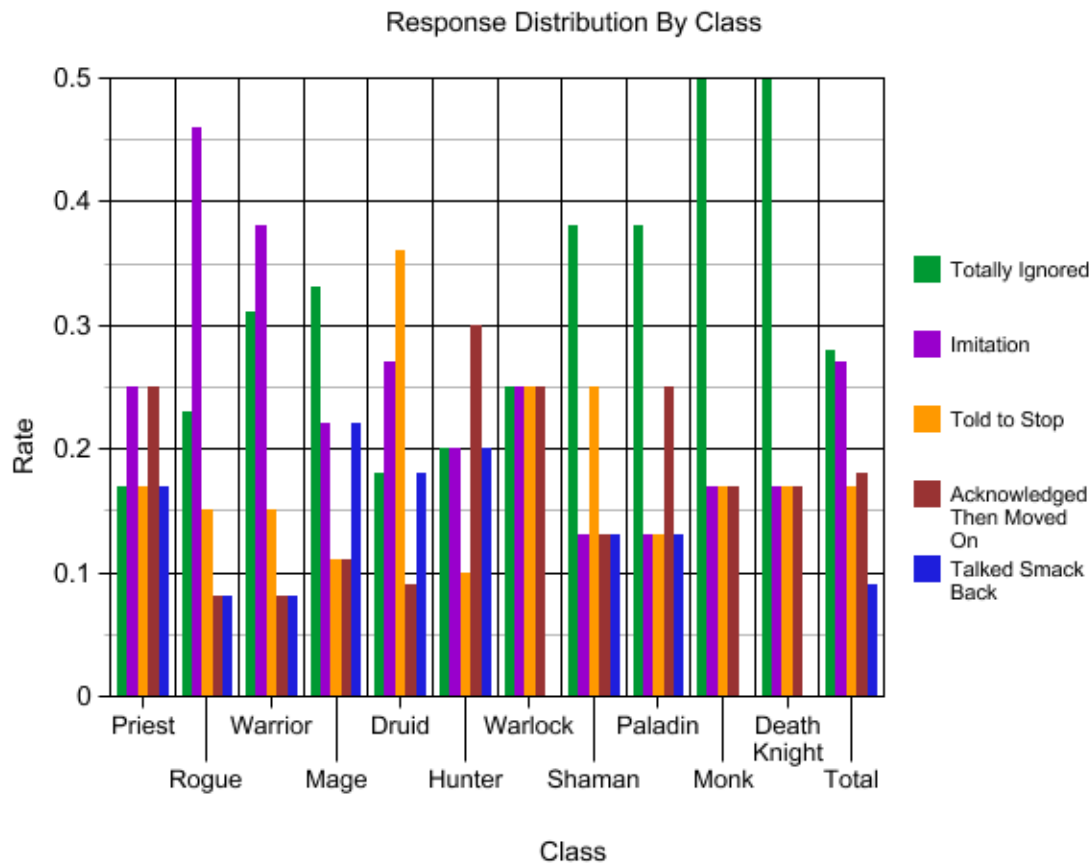
Table 2: Shows the highest response rate per variable

Variable/	Totally	Imitation	Told To	Acknowledged	Talked
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Response Category	Ignored		Stop	Then Moved On	Smack Back
Class	Monk, Death Knight 50%	Rogue 46%	Druid 36%	Hunter 30%	Mage 22%
Race	Blood Elf 36%	Troll 40%	Undead 33%	Blood Elf 27%	Pandaren 50%
Level	(76-100) 59%	(1-25) 42%	(26-50) 23%	(26-50) 23%	(26-50), (51-75)
Time of Day	(13-18) 34%	(7-12) 44%	(0-6), (19-24) 23%	(13-18) 39%	(0-6) 15%
Total	28%	27%	17%	18%	9%

Class

Figure 2: Shows the various trolling response rates by class



There are 11 various classes in *World of Warcraft*. They include Priest, Rogue, Warrior, Mage, Druid, Hunter, Warlock, Shaman, Paladin, Monk, and Death Knight. Each individual class has a significant impact on a player's abilities and base stats. I found a few correlations by class (see Figure 2).

First off, players who ignored me most often were Monks (50%) and Death Knights (50%). Both were nearly double the average (M=28%). However, one thing to be noted, making this stat highly likely for debate, is that the Death Knight (n=6) was also the class studied least. Additionally, Shaman and Paladin totally ignored me more frequently than the norm (M=28%) by roughly 10 percentage points. Those who were far below the average were Druids (18%) and Hunters (20%). They were roughly two-thirds of the average (M=28%). This category also had the most responses (n=28), so it is the least likely to incite debate.

Rogues (n=13) and Warriors (n=13) imitated my methods of trolling more frequently than any other class. Rogues rate of imitation (46%) was significantly higher than the average (M=27%). Warriors (38%) exceeded the average rate (M=27%) by 11 percentage points. Shaman (13%) and Paladin (13%) had imitation rates lower than the average (M=27%) by more than half.

The third most popular response was acknowledging me and just moving on (n=18). With regards to class, Hunters (30%) tended to acknowledge me and move on the most often. The average amongst all classes was 18%. Warriors (8%), Rogues (8%), and Druids (9%) all had a rate nearly half of the norm (M=18%).

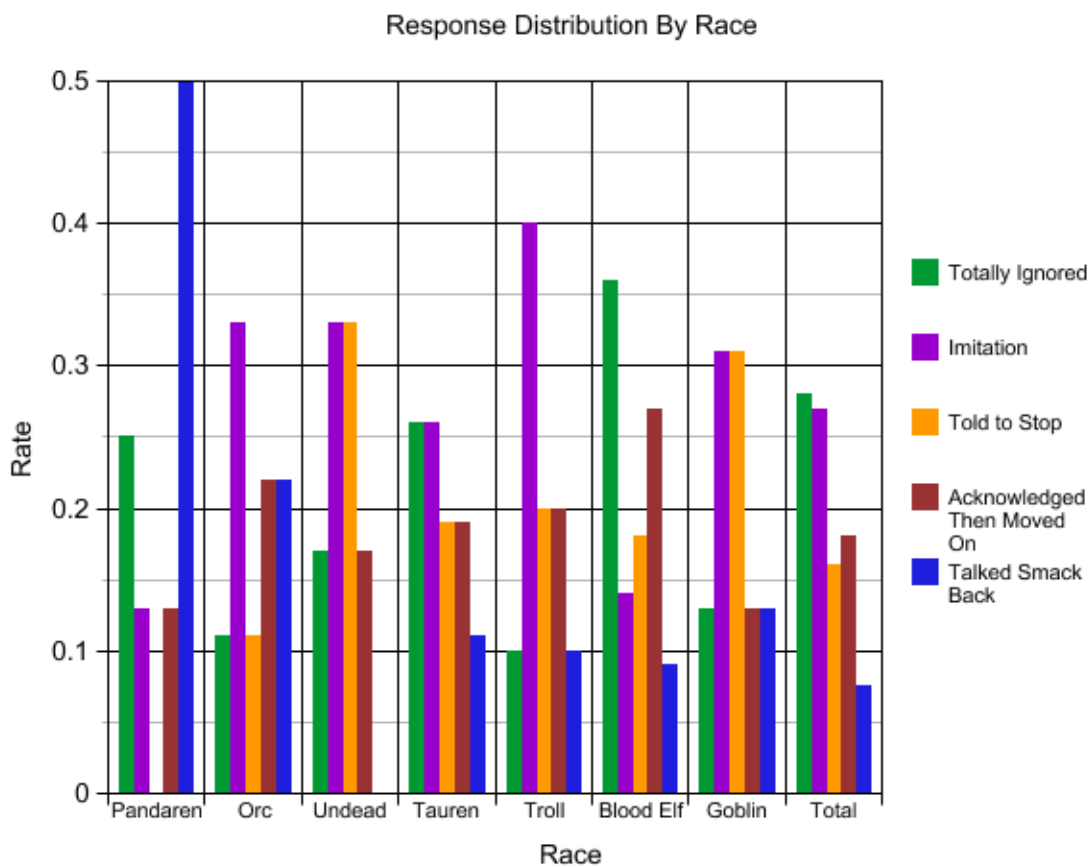
Druids (30%) told me to stop trolling more frequently than any other class. Their rate (30%) was much higher compared to the average (M=17%). In addition,

Warlocks (25%) and Shamans (25%) experienced a high frequency of telling me stop. On the other hand, Hunters (10%) were the most quiet on the chat interface.

Talking smack back was the least frequent response (n=9). Mages (23%), Druids (18%), and Hunters (20%) all talked smack more than double the average (9%). This category showed the least amount of responses (n=9), so the data for this category was the least likely to be representative of all data.

Race

Figure 3: Shows the various trolling response rates by race



There are two types of factions in *World of Warcraft*: Horde and Alliance. The only races studied by me were Horde, due to the fact I was a low level, and I was limited to Horde regions. The races I was capable of studying were Pandaren, Orc,

Undead, Tauren, Troll, Blood Elf, and Goblin. There were some slight correlations by race (see Figure 3); the most interesting being that Trolls (40%) imitated my trolling most often. Also, in my study (n=100), I trolled Taurens (n=27) the most of the 7 different races. This was due to the fact that I spent a lot of my time in regions loaded with early-leveled Taurens, so there was not much variety of different race characters to harass.

With regards to totally ignoring me, I found Blood Elves (36%) had the highest rate, which was 9 percentage points greater than the average. I also discovered that Trolls rarely ignored me, only doing it 10 percent of the time. Goblins further followed suit, having a rate of 13%.

As far as imitation, Trolls (40%) imitated me more often than any other race. I uncovered that their "Imitation" rate was 40%, which was 13 percentage points higher than the average (M=27%). My results also showed that Pandarens (13%) and Blood Elves (M=14%) have a below average imitation response rate, both around half of the average (M=27%).

The race that responded most by acknowledging me and then moving on were Blood Elves (27%). The average rate was 17%. Other than that, I found no other strong correlations by race for "Acknowledged Then Moved On" (see Figure 3).

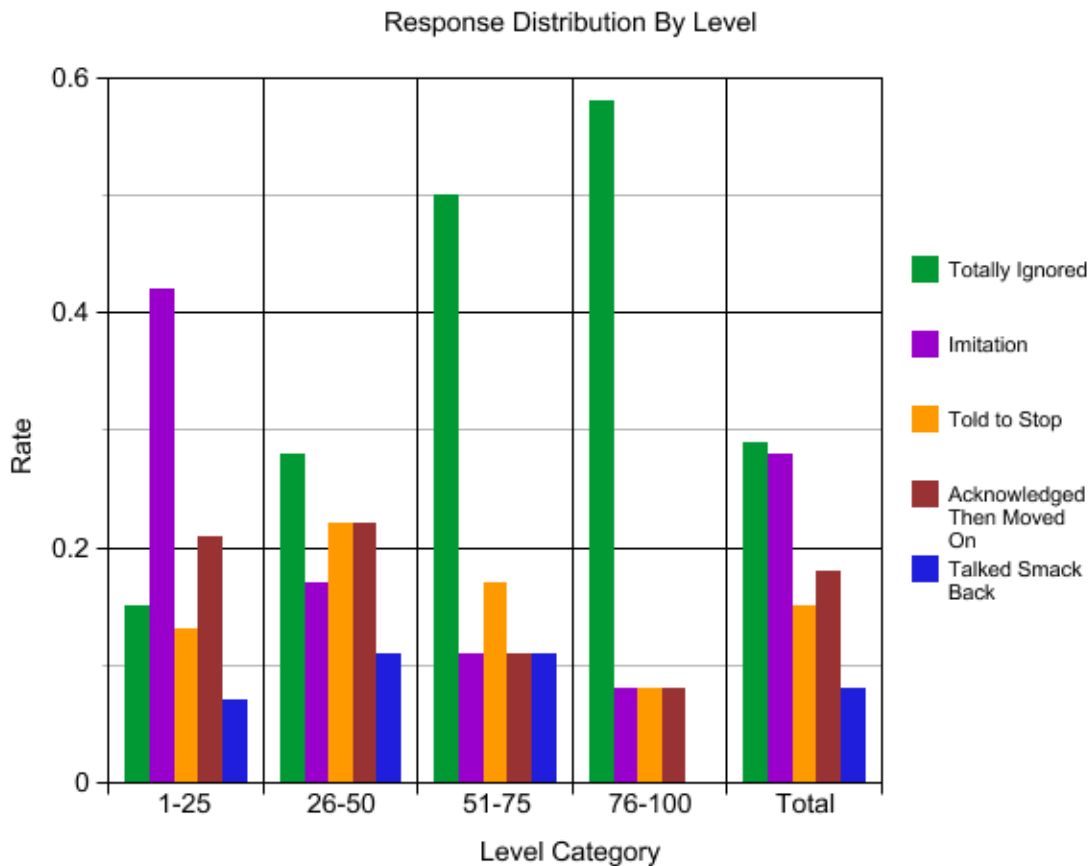
Races that chose to tell me to stop most frequently were Undeads (33%) and Goblins (31%). They were both almost double the average rate (M=17%) for "Told Me To Stop". Pandarens (0%) never once told me to stop. It should be noted also

that Pandarens (n=8) are the second least studied race as well, making their data less substantial.

The main trend in this graph is the Pandaren response rate of “Talked Smack Back” (50%)(see Figure 3). Once again, this statistic was not totally reliable due to the fact it had a low number of responses (n=8). As well, I found that Orcs (22%) had a high “Talked Smack Back” response rate. The Undead race had a smack talk response rate of 0%, and was class which talked smack back the least frequently.

Level

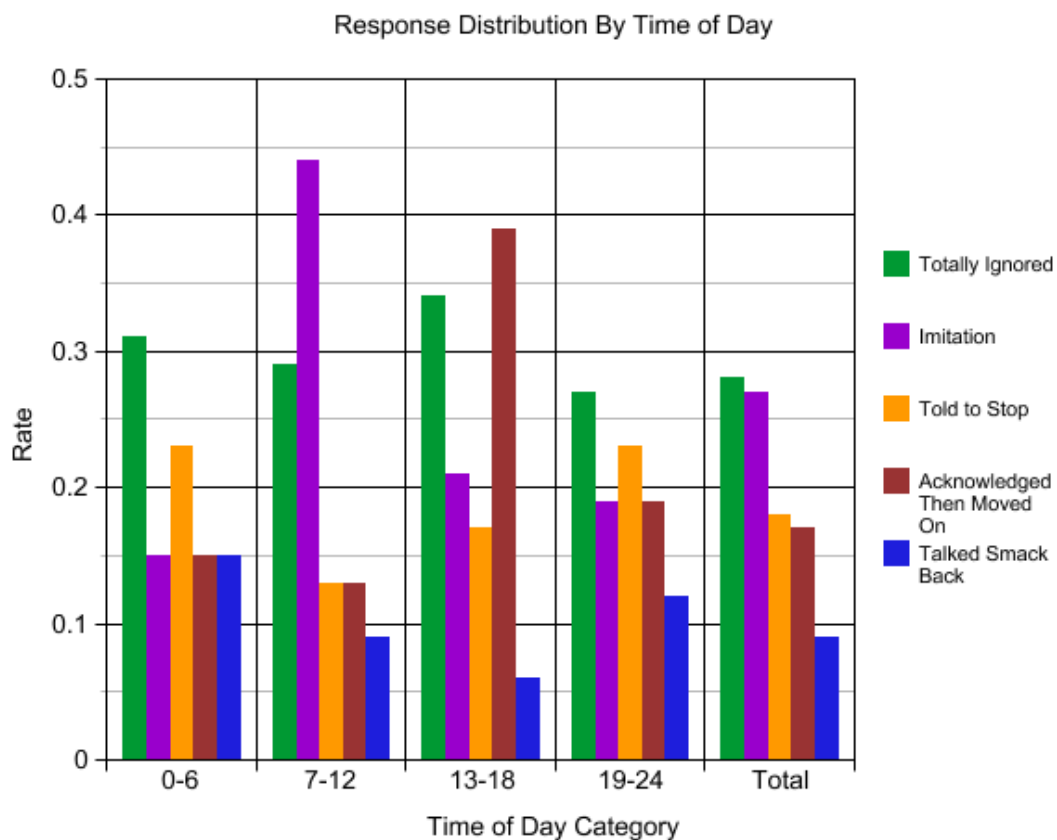
Figure 4: Shows the various trolling response rates by level



Characters in *World of Warcraft* all have a level, which is reflective of how many experience points (XP) have been earned. Characters earn XP by killing beasts and completing quests. After looking at the data, I broke it down into 4 different level categories. Characters ranged from 1-100, so I made four groups of 25 consecutive levels. There was one main point I was able to take away from this variable; the higher level a character is, the more often they will ignore trolling. As seen in Figure 4, “Totally Ignored” steadily grows as level category increases. Imitation (41%) had highest response rate amongst low-leveled (1-25) characters. Opposite to “Totally Ignored”, “Imitation” decreased as level category increased (see Figure 4). Low-level players were the majority of those I observed (n=52). Additionally, I only observed 12 characters leveled 76-100, so their data may not be the most reflective of the whole. All in all, I found two strong correlations as character level increased: the “Imitation” rate declined, and “Totally Ignored” rate grew (see Figure 4).

Time of Day

Figure 5: Shows how time of day affects players' response to trolling



The time of day in *World of Warcraft* varies across different realms, or servers. The realm I played in, Dargonmaw, has the same time as Central Standard Time Zone. I split the day into four equal categories. There were only slight correlations by time of day. From 7-12, players exhibited the highest imitation response rate (44%). The average imitation rate (M=27%) was significantly lower

then when the time was from 7-12 (44%). Furthermore, from 13-18 (39%), players most frequently just “Acknowledged Then Moved On” then any other time range. This was more than double the average “Acknowledged Then Moved On” rate (M=17%). In addition, this time range showed the highest rate of “Totally Ignored” (34%). From 0-6, players imitated me the least frequently (15%). Other than those, I was unable to find any other strong correlations of trolling responses and time of day (see Figure 5).

Discussion

From my study, I was able to find some factors that affected players’ responses to trolling more than others. When looking at class, a few strong correlations were apparent. Rogues (46%) and Warriors (37%) both are significantly higher than the average (M=27%). They also were least likely to incite debate with the highest number of participants (N=13) for both. I cannot explain necessarily why this occurred, but my guess would be that beginning players liked these classes most, since characters ranged 1-25 imitated most often (42%). Beginning players have less experience with “trolls” in *World of Warcraft*, thus making trolls more interesting and more fun to imitate and respond to. I question the high “Totally Ignored” rates by both Monks and Death Knights, since both had a low number of participants. Death Knights (n=6) had the least number of participants and Monks were second least (n=8). I doubt this data is totally

representative of the class as a whole, but there is no way of proving this unless I increase the number of participants in my study.

When looking at my results from race, ironically, Trolls (40%) imitated my trolling more often than any other class. I believe this rate may have been so high because players evolve and grow into their character. Trolls are not typically known for being annoying, but their name draws significant meaning on the Internet. This may be the reason why their "Imitation" rate was so high. I think it is also important to understand that the Pandaren stats are not the most statistically backed. I observed Pandarens (n=8) the second least of all races. Their extremely high "Talk Smack Back" rate (50%) is most likely not representative of the race as a whole. Furthermore, they also never "Told Me To Stop", so this stat, along with all other Pandaren rates, is not substantiated.

With regards to level, I found the greatest and most significant trend. To put it simply, high-level (76-100) players were much less responsive to trolling than low-level players (1-25). As seen in Figure 4, low-level players imitated the most often, while high-level players (76-100). I believe this occurred for two simple reasons. High-level players naturally encountered more trolls, making them more annoying and less unique, whereas low-level players may never have even seen one before. This makes imitation a more natural response for low-level players because they simply are intrigued by it more.

When looking at time of day, there were the slightest correlations within the data. From 7-12 in Dargonmaw time, players imitated my trolling the most often. I predict this is likely because less serious and newer players played during this time.

The only other anomaly in the data occurred in the time range of 13-18. Players in this time range “Acknowledged Then Moved On” nearly 40% of the time, more than players in any other time of day. I cannot explain this correlation either. There is no reason apparent to me why this occurred.

There were some limitations to my data. The greatest has to be my player level. I played in low-level regions of the game, making it hard to find players of high level. Another problematic part of my data is that I was only able to study Horde races due to my low-level and regions, which I played. I had no data whatsoever on characters of the Alliance. Finally, there were some problems with getting balanced results. Some races, like Pandarens, had a very low number of responses, so getting trustworthy data across the board was an issue. I see room for expansion on my study by increasing the quantity of results first, and also playing as a character of the Alliance. In addition, there is a gap in research at studying verbal responses alone. For another potential study, I could look at how players respond to different forms of verbal trolling on the chat interface.

All in all, trolling is something that all people get annoyed with at some point in their lives on the Internet. In *World of Warcraft*, players can troll anyone, and there is no filter to stop them. While one can choose to ignore, there are more interesting ways to respond. With a golf clap, fart, or saying “shoo”, a player can respond to a troll’s work with cunning sarcasm and humor, or they can choose to talk smack back via the chat interface. In the vast world of MMORPGS and *World of Warcraft*, there is no true limit in the variety of responses to trolling.

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