

HOW TO ROLE-PLAY

AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY ON THE WAYS PLAYERS

ROLE-PLAY IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT



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Introduction

Over the course of about a week and a half, I immersed myself in the World of Warcraft role-playing realms. I acted as a participant observer in order to discover how these players go about the task of role-playing. I attempted to join RP groups, as well as participate in any world RP I could find. I also observed the WoW RP forum "World's End Tavern". Over the course of this research, I found that players go about role-playing in many different and interesting ways. These are there stories.

Keywords: Realm; RP (Role-playing); Guild; MMORPG; Forum; Grief (Griefer, Griefing); Lore; In Character (IC); Out of Character (OOC); Emote;

World of Warcraft was released on November 23rd, 2004, by Blizzard Entertainment©. Since then, it has grown to become the largest and most widely played MMORPG in the world. The game itself is split up into dozens of different realms, which house the players of the game. These realms can be one of four types. They are Player vs. Environment (PvE), Player vs. Player (PvP), Role-playing (RP), and Role-playing Player vs. Player (RPPvP). While each realm has something special to offer, I will be taking a closer look at the RP realms.

In RP realms, the players are expected to act in character whilst playing the game. They act as if they are really living in Azeroth as whatever race they have chosen. They create a name that would fit there RP character, and are also expected to act (to an extent) in the accordance with the lore of their race (Shandris, 2011). Another major theme of the RP realms is the avoidance of real world discussion. Those who try to talk about modern issues, such as politics or sports, are unwelcome in RP realms.

The question I'm trying to answer revolves around how players go about the task of role-playing in WoW. How do they start their journey? How do they present themselves in-game? How is the way they play different from non-RP realms? I hoped to find answers to these questions through simply playing the game.

Previous studies have shown a lot about the MMO field, and also some interesting information about the RP aspect of them. Nick Yee conducted a survey about motivation to play MMORPGs (Yee, 2007). Through his survey, he was able to conclude that people play MMOs for three major reasons: achievement, motivation, and immersion. Within the category of immersion was the subcategory of role-playing. The motivation he found in role-playing revolved around players creating a persona for themselves and acting out their character "with other players to create an improvised story." In their study about the social life of guilds, Williams et. al. (2006) noted that RP guilds seemed "to be playing another game entirely" (p.356), when compared to social, raid, or PvP guild. In a study about realm motivation, it was concluded that players go to RP realms primarily for the social aspects of them (Pollock et. al.). These players want to interact with one another as if living in Azeroth. Pollock et. al. (2013) also noted that the RP players were better-spoken, more often using proper grammar and punctuation. While these studies say a lot about RP realms, they don't go into any explicit detail about how the role-playing is actually done. This question of "how" is precisely what I was looking to answer when I entered WoW's RP realms.

Method

To go about conducting this research, I first had to create a couple characters in RP realms. I chose the “Moonguard” realm and “Wrymrest Accord,” because they are the two largest RP realms. I then created two characters: one Alliance and one Horde. I did this to see if there were any major differences between the factions. I then began adventuring and observing.

After playing for a short period, I came to a realization. I don’t know how to role-play. That was when I started looking through WoW’s RP specific forum, “World’s End Tavern.” In it, I found a guide to the basics of role-playing in WoW (Shandris, 2011). It gave me a simple rundown of how to begin task of roleplaying. The guide contained some basic RP terms, a few RP add-ons to change the game’s interface, how to go about RP combat, and some helpful links to other useful forum threads.

After reading up on my topic, I set out to role-play in Azeroth. I started leveling my characters in order to see how the RP was conducted through the leveling zones. I took note of what the players around me were doing, and I tried to fit in as much as possible. After playing for some time, I found areas that seemed to be the center of the role-playing. For the Alliance, it is the small town of Goldshire, located just outside of the Alliance capital of Stormwind. On the Horde side, the RP hub turned out to be the Horde capital of Orgrimmar. These areas were packed full of role-players, and I found these to be the best places to observe the population.

I soon began to try and join RP groups, to get a first-hand look at what role-playing in WoW is really like. I was able to find a “family role-playing” group that welcomed me. Each member of the group acted as if they were family members with the other group mates. I took up the mantel as the father, and I had a wonderful time playing the role. We laughed, we cried, and above all, we grew together as a family.

Results

Over the course of the research I was able to develop some insight into the RP realms. In doing so I was able to break up the role-playing into different categories. There is the beginner RP. This is the beginning of any player’s journey into the RP realms of WoW, and it represents the steps that go into creating a character and developing their backstory. Next is the group RP. This is when a group of players come together to role-play amongst themselves, and act out their own story. Then there’s the world RP. This is when players just go out into an area and role-play with anyone around them. All seem to be welcome in the world RP. There is also the forum RP. This is conducted within the “World’s End Tavern”, and usually consists of players coming together to write out their own stories. All of these types make up the larger scope of role-playing within WoW.

Beginner RP

Before starting a role-playing character, there are some general factors to consider. One must first go about creating their character and giving said character a description and a backstory. I found an easily understood RP character description framework on the forums

(Valheim, 2011). It gives a general outline for players to describe their character, using things like name, age, physical description, personality, and marital status. After defining one's basic traits, the next step is to give the character a backstory. The backstory is really just a description about how this character came to be who they are today. It can be short and sweet, or very elaborate. That choice falls to the player.

In her guide, Shandris describes 2 RP add-ons that can be quite useful to any role-player (Shandris, 2011). They are by no means required, but can enhance the RP experience. The first is MyRoleplay. This add-on allows players to give themselves a physical description, as well as a place to write in their backstory. Anybody with this add-on can see the description of any other player with MyRoleplay. Another useful tool is SpeakinSpell. This add-on allows players to tie in certain abilities with sayings, but doesn't make them say them every time the ability is used. It can also give sayings to certain health requirements, like when the player's health drops below 40% they will say something about being wounded. I saw this mod being used to its fullest in an in-game duel. The players readied their weapons before the battle, were saying phrases at different points, and with the warrior's execution ability he yelled "With my axe I end thee!" It was a very interesting battle to witness, and when I asked them how they did it after the duel, they simply said that they had used SpeakinSpell.

One last piece of information to consider is how to carry one's self within the RP realm. Depending on where one is and what they are doing, there are different social norms. For instance, many players in RP realms walk instead of run. This is done with a simple key press that can be found within the key bindings of the game. Also, if a character is simply trying to RP

in the open world, they should talk using either the say or yell methods, and they should also use emotes to describe how they feel or what they are doing. If a player is looking for people to RP with, then they'll probably have to ask while out of character (OoC) (Shandris, 2011). To do this, they should say what they are going to say within “(())” double parenthesis. Also the trade chat in major cities is almost always OoC; therefore, the proper OoC notation is not required. With these basic tools in hand, any player should be ready to start their journey in the RP realms.

Group RP

Group RP usually takes place within small, but sometimes large, groups of players. Group RP has “set, specific people role-playing a specific topic, and it can be either open or closed to outside players” (Shandris, 2011). The way players go about group RP varies immensely based on the group makeup. I've seen many different kinds of groups, such as the lore role-play that attempts to follow the story, the battlefield role-play that seeks to act out large scale battles, and lastly, the type I participated in, is the family role-play.

My experience with the family role-play was quite interesting. I was a troll, and took up the roll as the father of our merry band of four. My significant other was a blood elf with a mana addiction. Traveling with us was her apathetic brother and our son. It was very fun to play, and it gave me some role-playing experience. I tried to act in accordance with my character's troll background. I spoke with a Jamaican like accent, and I talked a lot about voodoo. My “wife” was always talking about the magic she wanted, and she often went out, getting drunk between adventures. Her brother seemed to act bored about the entire situation.

Our son was very upset with his mother's addiction, and also kept trying to usurp me as head of the household through duels, though he was never able to succeed. Through adventuring in this family, I came to a simple conclusion: the group RP is entirely dependent on the players taking part in it. No matter what, the players are what define any RP.

World RP

The world RP is much more open than a group RP. In fact, world RP is "open for anyone to join, and is held in a place that is easily accessible" (Shandris, 2011). This usually just consists of players being "themselves" in an open area. I noticed that the world RP usually took place in Goldshire and Orgrimmar. In Goldshire, most players were mingling within the inn. They sat around the tables, drank together, and flirted with one another. They also attempted to host parties within the specific rooms, and some of the darker characters seemed to be having demon cult meetings in the inn's basement. Orgrimmar RP was different than Goldshire in how spread out it was. Orgrimmar is a much larger area, and people were out and about role-playing across the entire city. A major topic of the time period was a general hatred of the warchief of the Horde, Garrosh Hellscream. I actually saw a group of player, mostly trolls, protesting his leadership and his aggressive behavior.

The behaviors of these players made one thing very clear. The world RP is very strong in WoW. If a player wishes to RP in this game, they can simply walk to their faction's RP hub, and begin acting out their character. The players all seemed very open, and I had little difficulty joining into the fun. I only ran into one major issue when trying to participate in world RP. That problem came in the form of griefers.

Anti RP

Griefers make up a group that I consider to be anti RP. They aren't there to participate in the RP of world, as much as they are there to try and get in the way of other player's RP experience. They come in and act in character; however, they attempt to confuse or ruin the fun of other characters. For instance, they may come into a world RP and attempt to flirt with a hunter's pet. They may also attempt to crash in-game social events. I witnessed a player wedding in the cathedral of Stormwind, and I sat down in order to observe. Another player entered and attempted to grief the wedding. She claimed to have been having an affair with the groom, and also said that they had had a child together. The wedding party became very upset at the interruption, but the griefer didn't stop until it was clear that she had ruined the ceremony. These players are simply trying to make the role-players mad, and if they get a reaction then they win. After searching the forums, it became clear that the best way to deal with griefers is to "ignore, report, and move on" (Slywyn, 2011).

Forum RP

The last type of role-playing occurs within the official Blizzard Battle.net RP forum, "World's End Tavern". There are some general expectations that go into forum RP, as outlined by Meep (2011). First off, spelling and grammar are required. The players do not take kindly to numerous spelling mistakes. Next are the "don'ts" of RP in general. No powergaming, where somebody makes their character ridiculously overpowered. Also there is no god-modding, where

one player controls the actions of another. By following these simple rules, it isn't too hard to participate in forum RP. This RP method usually consists of two types, open and closed RP (Meep, 2011). Both types begin with a post by the thread master, the person who starts the thread.

In an open RP, the first post gives a general idea of the scenario that is going to be role-played. It is character driven, simple, and it follows the path set out by its participants. Anyone can join an open RP simply by posting to it. These types of RPs are made to be simple so as to keep the plot rolling. However due to their nature, open RPs can be quite random. I actually participated in one open RP. It was a story that was told one word at a time by any player that chose to participate (Truthe, 2013). It followed the random nature of the open RP. The story ranged from giant gnomes to Garrosh (Warchief of the Horde) eating cheese puffs. Another, more specific, type of open RP is the tavern RP. It is set in a tavern where basically nothing special happens. The players just act as if they are all sitting around in a bar room setting and they have conversations as such. It is a more relaxed environment but still requires participation.

For a more structured and detailed experience, a closed RP is the place to be. A closed RP is a little more exclusive. It is heavily driven by the thread master, and it usually begins with an OoC signup thread, where players can sign up for the IC version of the thread. The signup thread usually gives a short description of the IC thread and a template for signing up. Once the thread master has chosen those who will participate, he/she will then create the closed thread for the participants. In it the people are expected to follow the rules that have been laid out by

the thread master. The people are also expected to actually participate in the thread, and to put effort into their posts. Above all, they are expected to follow the lead of the thread master. A closed RP is definitely more structured than an open RP, but they both make up what is WoW's forum RP.

Discussion

After observing the role-playing aspect of WoW, I have come to a simple conclusion. Role-playing in WoW relies on the social features of the game. While doing my leveling quests, I never saw anybody trying to RP by themselves or with the NPCs. All of the RP was either in major RP hubs or was done within a group RP setting. People come together in these realms so as to create their own stories with other people. The social connections created in these RP mediums could easily lead to future research questions.

While I had a lot of fun doing this research, I felt constrained by the time frame. I was only able to research for about a week and a half, and I believe I was only able to scratch the surface of these RP realms. However, I spent my time working diligently on this research, and I believe the 5 types of RP I covered lay out a good foundation for future research in the RP medium. One could take a closer look at questions in any one of those categories. What steps do most players take before beginning an RP character? What different types of group RPs are currently parts of WoW? How do RP guilds set up their own group RPs? In what ways do players start or join world RP? What are the most effective ways of griefing in RP realms? What are the

major differences between open and closed forum RP? What are the best tactics for starting a well written closed RP? What types of social bonds are forged while participating in WoW's RP medium?

As I said before, I only scratched the surface of what it means to role-play in the World of Warcraft. However, the model I have presented outlines how the players go about the task of role-playing in WoW, and it lays out a foundation for future research in this RP medium. While it only makes up a fraction of that which is WoW, the role-playing aspect of it is home to wealth of stories just waiting to be told.

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