Conceptions and Preconceptions of Role-players in World of Warcraft

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Introduction

There has long been a community of World of Warcraft players known for roleplaying . Roleplaying is an aspect of the game in which players develop personas for their characters and interact with each other as if a part of the game world. The game has realms set aside, that is to say they are marked specifically as roleplaying realms, in which additional rules are enforced to promote roleplaying, asking for realistic character names and frowning upon disruption of roleplay, among other things.

In a study of 912 self-selected MMORPG players, 20% identified themselves primarily as roleplayers(Cole t al, 2007). On the other hand as many as 60% of MMO players in a study of 2,467 indicated having tried roleplaying at some point (Yee, 2006). This would indicate that many players have expressed interest in trying roleplay but have failed to find a continued interest. While studies such as the one done by Cole et al (2007) have looked into the social dynamics of MMORPGs, the focus was broad, intending to find how common it is for MMORPG players to find good friends in game. Nick Yee's roleplaying series analyzed the prevalence of the roleplaying community and inquired into character types and habits, but didn't look far into motivations or the like. In "Player Types: Motivations to Play Different Types of Realms in World of Warcraft," Pollock et al (2013) found that most players on non-roleplay realms ranked roleplay realms poorly in their list of preferences, with players claiming roleplay realms to be weird or unusual despite their lack of experience with them. Players on roleplaying realms, however, were unexpectedly noted as playing there for the literacy and social aspects outside of roleplay more so than roleplay itself. This indicates that there is a social stigma that roleplay realms are something they are not.

The cause of these stereotypes may lie in the widespread belief that roleplayers have a strict view of behaviour in game. The magic circle (Ludens, 1955), a concept which defines the separating boundary between an imagined world and the real world in which it is represented. Roleplayers bear a reputation for enforcing the magic circle to an extreme degree, doing everything they can to create an immersive experience, frowning upon those who break this boundary.

This study seeks to understand the origins and motivations of dedicated roleplayers, their feelings on the Warcraft roleplay community, and what misconceptions they believe exist in relation to it.

Method

Participants

The three participants are all close acquaintances who currently play on the Horde side on the Moon Guard realm. All of them previously played the same faction on The Scryers realm, and two of them spent time on the Wyrmrest Accord realm as Alliance players. These are all roleplaying realms, with Moon Guard and Wyrmrest Accord both holding a reputation for being the most active roleplaying realms in the North America region. Their time was requested prior to the interview and each agreed beforehand to take part.

Interview-Design, material, and procedure

Each interview was conducted through the game, one using the game's private messaging system and the other two through party chat. Each transcript was recorded through the Prat 3.0 addon and placed into a document. The interview had six guiding questions which each interviewee was asked to answer however they chose, with any other questions being asked for the sake of clarification or further detail.

Analysis

Each participant was contacted through a voice channel they are known to spend their spare time in to arrange for when the interview would take place. Each participant was asked to

respond with their character name and the date to indicate their consent in participating, after which a series of questions were asked. The entire session was copied and pasted to a word document as they were finished.

Results

Brox

Brox first began roleplaying when he was introduced to a group online by his cousin. He was quickly hooked with the idea of creating a character and interacting with others to create storylines through roleplay. He mentioned that he creates a basic structure for his characters but chooses to let interactions with others guide how the character's personality develops. He noted that he becomes heavily attached to his characters despite his lack of control over their development, and this seems to be a characteristic that draws him into other games like Dungeons and Dragon. His approach towards roleplaying was similar to how most people do reading a book, leaving only a small modicum of control in his own hands as he plays out the character as its own separate entity.

While he enjoys the roleplaying community in WoW, his largest frustration came from players who have characters which are not "balanced." He related back to his experiences in Dungeons and Dragons in which players are limited by stats and rules, whereas the Warcraft community often allows players free reign over their characters, which can result in all-powerful characters without having done anything to earn it. When asked about misconceptions the larger Warcraft community might hold towards roleplayers, he indicated that many people likely believe roleplayers to be the 'nerdiest of the nerds' because of their tendency to focus on things other than traditional gameplay.

When asked what he thought other players should know about the community, he voiced a concern that people don't realize how large the RP community is, and what resources there are to facilitate it. He referred to addons that allow players to display character descriptions and

background to distinguish them from others. He also praised Blizzard for creating RP realms and developing a vast world which has many places available for players to RP in. He ends by pointing out that many dedicated roleplayers are willing to help newer players learn to roleplay, whether they simply want to try it or are genuinely interested in becoming active roleplayers.

Commentary

He followed what Nick Yee (2006) describes as the Interaction-Scripted character model, in which the player develops a rough outline of who their character is and what they've done, relying on interaction with others to develop the character's personality. While this is as much a development process as it is a character archetype, it is known to create realistic characters that are more dynamic in the long run, and also tends to cause a more diverse set of circumstances than pre-scripted characters.

His dislike of overly powerful players aligned with Nick Yee's (2006) findings that players who force their actions onto others, commonly known as 'God-Moding,' are frowned upon. His feelings about the misconceptions of the community are similar to the findings of Pollock et al (2013), believing roleplayers to be a misunderstood bunch that is thought of as being different from the average player.

Lucy

Lucy first began roleplaying after a friend introduced her to the online text-based roleplay community in forums, chat programs, and Multi User Dungeon (MUD) games. She started playing World of Warcraft with the intent to join the roleplaying community, interested in trying roleplay accompanied with visual graphics.

Her interest in roleplay stemmed from its social and creative nature. She, like Brox, was also drawn into the novel-like qualities of roleplay, enjoying the degree of control she had in creating her own characters while still experiencing the unexpected turns of interaction with other players. She particularly noted that different character interactions can develop tension

and suspense, things that are hard to find in the stereotypical plots of most modern media, as various unique motives come together to form fluid and lifelike storylines.

When asked about the WoW roleplaying community, Lucy responded that drawing a conclusion would be difficult, considering how vast the community was and how many types of roleplayers there are. She claimed that almost any interest was represented somewhere, by some group of roleplayers, a fact that she greatly appreciates, even if some of the roleplays were outside her realm of interest.

In regards to the larger communities misconceptions she noted that most outsiders likely view roleplayers as people hiding from the world, roleplaying to avoid some sense of regret or shame at not accomplishing much in the real world. She did remark that there is a degree of escapism in roleplay, and that some people live this stereotype, but she also points out that roleplayers are often the people all around us: "the raider beside you or the healer who save you in pvp...your coworkers, your peers, even your bosses." She said that roleplaying is how they choose to relax, writing stories instead of reading them, or watching them on t.v. She also refutes the idea that roleplayers can't play the game very well, mentioning that she PvPs and known many raiders who roleplay as well.

In her final remarks, she asked that anyone who looks down on roleplay try it, and saying that she believes everyone is a roleplayer in some respect, because they use their imagination and tend to enjoy a good story.

Commentary

Lucy was an example of a traditional roleplayer, who began roleplaying long before World of Warcraft was released. She followed the trend demonstrated by Brox, enjoying roleplay as an outlet for creativity in a somewhat restricted and unpredictable setting. Her remark on the WoW roleplay community makes a good point - enough people roleplay with so many different motives that generalizing anything about them results in a stereotype that is

liable to be incredibly inaccurate. It also raises the question as to why the community is so misunderstood if it is so sizeable and varied.

The misconceptions she noted follow the line of thinking set by her feelings on the community, expressing that WoW roleplayers come in all shapes and sizes, and are often people from all walks of life who consider roleplay an outlet for their creativity. Her final remark related a sense of welcomeness and encouragement, following Brox's comment that the roleplaying community is glad to help new players. Lucy also encouraged even those who aren't interested to try it, to gain perspective if nothing else.

Sam

Since a young age Sam "aspired to be a writer,... the same sort of ambition as being an astronaut, if being honest." He was homeschooled during his early teen years due to illness. After his family got internet access, he quickly latched on to the chance to use roleplay as an opportunity to improve his writing and to socialize with others. When asked about the differences between traditional writing and roleplaying, he pointed out that roleplay requires a large degree of flexibility in a character's interactions, since a player shouldn't control the actions of someone else's character. He contrasted this to traditional writing, in which the writer has full control over everything that happens.

He first picked up World of Warcraft without the intent to roleplay, planning to enjoy it as another game of adventuring and dungeon delving. Friends later introduced him to the game's roleplaying community. During this answer he revealed his tendency towards creating a large number of characters to appreciate various perspectives and to give himself the opportunity to write new stories for these characters.

When asked about the roleplaying community, he asserted that it contains a variety of player types. Because of the different perspectives of the players, two characters with a very similar basic format can have drastically different personalities, just as how in the real world two similar people might be very different. He did make an aside about there being some players

whose contributions to a group are very negative, though their efforts are often outweighed enough by sincere players that the community continues to grow. On the note of the storyteller, he points out the players who gather to roleplay together are often like-minded, but their characters are not, allowing for friendly conflicts which encourage story growth.

When asked about misconceptions, he pointed out the existence of griefers, players who find joy in ruining other players' fun. In the case of roleplay, these players often spam spell effects or the chat to make it harder for players to focus on the roleplay. The first misconception he addressed was the misplaced belief that roleplayers don't play the game in the traditional sense. Some players frown upon roleplay as it doesn't actually advance the character in the game's terms, they don't gain new or improved gear nor does their character level up from it. While this is true in the logical sense, he would argue that any means of using the game for enjoyment counts as playing it, even if it is nontraditional. He also noted that roleplayers may be frowned upon for having a 'personality disorder' of sorts for creating something real from what is not within the game. He also refuted this point, remarking that many people get emotionally vested in movies and shows, claiming a player's empathetic bond with their character to be of the same sort. On the point of roleplayers wasting too much time doing something thought to be unproductive, he pointed out that many people spend that time watching tv or movies, and other players spend just as much, if not more time doing dungeons or preparing for raids, while roleplayers are exercising their creativity. He also made a point of discussing the presence of 'erotic roleplayers,' that is players who tend to have a more graphic, sexual focus to their roleplaying. While he acknowledges they exist, to the point there are prevalent communities of them, he says that they are far from the majority of the community. He noted his own group as tending towards a pg-13 approach where a 'fade to black' is assumed in romantic interactions, setting the line based on player comfort.

When asked what he'd like non-roleplayers to know about the roleplaying community, he pointed out that Warcraft, because of the supplied visuals, deep lore, and available addons, is a

good place for beginner roleplayers to try their hand. He also denied the claim that roleplayers are unapproachable because of their misunderstood motives, pointing out that roleplayers are known for developing their ideas in community settings, and aspect which makes them very open to helping those who want advice. He finished by encouraging any players who want to try their hand at roleplaying to give it a shot and see what they can do.

Commentary

Sam also engaged in roleplay as an opportunity to express his creativity in a novel setting, though it began as more of a social necessity than as a simple passtime. He also made a good point about the nature of roleplay in comparison to traditional storytelling in his remark about flexibility. Where a story can directly convey character interactions, it's important in the collaboration of roleplay to leave room for others to react. For example, when two characters are fighting, most players will have their character begin an attack, leaving the result open to the recipient to avoid god-moding (Yee, 2006). This also relates to the concept of accommodation mentioned in Nick Yee's 2006 study; while everyone wants to share their character and be a part of everything that's happening, it's important to realize that everyone else has similar interests.

He repeated Lucy's sentiment that the community is vast and varied, elaborating on the benefits. This is particularly important in demonstrating how important character development can be to some roleplayers. With pre-scripted character many players would end up playing the same trope, but the use of interaction to develop a character's personality can result in unexpected and interesting changes that drive storylines.

His extensive writing on misconceptions brought to light again the issue of stereotypes. While he acknowledged that, as with all stereotypes, there are those who embody the qualities, he pointed out that these players are very much in the minority, and his interview implies that most of these players only act as such in sheltered communities, otherwise acquiescing to the

preferences of everyone around them. He also shared the belief that the roleplaying community is open to newcomers, and encourages those who are interested to try it.

General Discussion

In each case, participants noted enjoying roleplay in the same way most people enjoy reading a book or watching a movie. While each had a slightly different take on it, each of the interviewees related roleplaying as a kind of interactive fiction, in which each person bears enough control over events to keep them engaged while still maintaining the unexpected plot twists that can be expected with numerous writers. This same style seems to indicate that each of them enjoys developing interaction-scripted characters (Yee, 2006). While only Brox explicitly described the growth of his characters, Lucy and Sam both mentioned character growth in relation to their interactions.

The interviews followed the trends defined by Yee (2006) in regards to roleplaying protocols. Sam thoroughly explained the need to accommodate others, and the tendency towards dynamic characters embraces the need for development in group roleplay. On the other hand, Sam addresses the issues of griefers and comfort levels, topics nearly untouched by Yee's study. The tendency towards ignoring griefers and working around overly dramatic characters emphasizes the point of accommodation that each player made in their closing remarks. This disputes the misconception that the roleplaying community is secluded, rather giving credence the idea that roleplayers are misunderstood because the larger community refuses to learn about them. He also notes that comfort levels tend to be mutually agreed upon by players, ensuring that while not all roleplayers will acquiesce to the lowest present comfort level, most are more than willing to do what they can to ensure everyone enjoys themselves.

In Brox's interview, the subject of god-moding (Yee, 2006) is discussed, and it is pointed out that WoW has no definitive system for ensuring roleplay is balanced between players. While many groups are known for establishing their own rules that they use within their circle of friends, issues can arise when roleplaying outside of this group as different systems clash. This

makes it easy to question whether WoW is the optimal medium for large-scale roleplay. While add-ons have been written and many players are willing to accommodate each other, particularly when they enjoy other players' characters, it can become frustrating to break character simply because rules need to be established for upcoming interactions. WoW's ambient mechanics are also known for lacking roleplay accommodations. Sometimes environmental set-pieces, such as chairs, are more difficult to interact with than would be expected, making it difficult to reflect what's happening in roleplay with one's character. Non-Player Characters (NPC's) are also known for having set paths and interactions with other NPC's and the environment, which sometimes causes them to walk right through a group of players, breaking the immersion those individuals have developed. While these arguments come together to make a sound argument against using WoW to roleplay, many people are attached to the community they've found, or other aspects of the game, making it the simplest choice. The effort of the community also makes it clear that the community believes the medium worth adapting to, through the creation of player-made rules and add-ons to improve the experience.

The misconceptions around the magic circle are likely the other factor which prevents players from even playing on roleplay servers, no less actually trying to roleplay. As noted previously, a preconception amongst most players exists that most roleplayers believe in remaining in character whenever possible to preserve a sense of immersion. Lucy's response in regards to roleplayers existing in all other aspects of the game goes a long way in dispelling that image. While there are small subsets of roleplayers that make their every action in the game relative to their character's persona, most choose to remain out of character when they're not actively roleplaying. As is noted in an article by Stenros (2014), the magic circle is a necessary social contract by which everyone engaging in a game, be it players looking to simply play World of Warcraft or those looking to engage in the activities within such as raiding and roleplaying, establishes what is and is not acceptable. The magic circle is not necessarily

concrete in its structure, and is most definitely porous as aspects within the game affect what is without and vice versa, and so is freely changed based on the players present and the objectives of that group. The only difference between the magic circle of a hardcore raid group and a group of roleplayers is the social pact being made. Both groups will behave differently when they're outside of this environment, the circle established by raiders just happens to be better known than the one roleplayers use.

Conclusion

Through these case studies it becomes apparent that roleplayers are misunderstood primarily because the community holds only a small set of stereotypes as answers to a large number of questions. While the roleplayers in this study were incredibly welcoming of new players looking to explore a new pastime, it would seem most players are too concerned with the unknown to give it a second glance. Some of the issues the roleplayers themselves found with the game stemmed directly from the medium they chose to use, raising the question of whether the game lends itself to the development of a well-known roleplaying community, or if the community has grown in spite of the circumstances around them.

The root of each of these misconceptions lay in the belief that roleplayers are of a different breed than other players. The majority of this article proved that roleplayers apply the same general principles as other players in a means with which the larger community is unfamiliar, from the social contract of the magic circle to the frustration at new developments as the game is developed.

The lack of demographic spread in the study warrants further research to discover if the passion for storytelling and reading are common in all roleplayers, interaction-scripted types, or if it varies from group to group. The welcoming embrace may also be less common than expected, though my own experiences with the community lead me to believe the majority of roleplayers encourage newcomers.

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