

I WANT TO PLAY A GAME



A LOOK INTO THE LIVES OF
AZEROTH'S MOST ABUSIVE
CITIZENS

Introduction

On November 23, 2004, Blizzard Entertainment released a game that would change the face of the video game industry. *World of Warcraft*, the fourth game set in the Warcraft universe, is an MMO-RPG, designed to allow players to create their own character from several different pre-made races and classes, choosing whatever better suits their style and personality. Setting out to complete quests and raid dungeons presented to them, players meet other players, occasionally forging an alliance or creating a rivalry. The game becomes more than a digital world to explore individually, but a place where others, similar to the player, reside to interact with; it becomes a social environment.

The social aspect of gaming has become a prominent reason for newcomers to begin playing a game and for veterans to return, as evidenced in studies such as Nick Yee's "Motivations of Play in Online Games" and "Motivations for Gameplay", Ben Henderson and Alex Santistevan. In their study, Henderson and Santistevan seek out the reasons for motivation to play, and find that the social aspect is one of the biggest motivators to get people playing. The social side of a game is a appealing to players. However, with these social games, a player will eventually come across someone who has different intentions than those planned for by other players. These people, known as trolls, strive to become a problem to others. When they perform actions in order to cause these problems, it becomes trolling, an act that is widespread throughout several mediums, not just games specifically. It is an issue that has been known to go beyond the digital domain.

Due to the little amount of research that has been done on trolling, there is not formal definition. According to the website *Know Your Meme*: “**Trolling** refers to any behavior that is meant to intentionally anger or frustrate someone else”. This is the basic goal of a troll: to become a hindrance to others, whether they are game players or they are just trying to participate in a discussion online.

The act of trolling can be seen across many different mediums, even appearing out beyond the realm of gaming. It exists everywhere. In 2008, the actor Joaquin Phoenix announced his retirement from acting, a move that began a long and complex process of trolling that would result in the movie *I'm Still Here*. The retirement, all a hoax, was an act put on by Phoenix in order to prove his opinion on society's rising necessity for reality television shows. It was all a play to show the flaws in the society, and thus trolling. This is just one example of trolling's existence outside of video games to show how widespread and popular the notion has become.

While trolling does live in various corners of the world, this study evaluates its presence in video games, specifically in *World of Warcraft*. The game is the theoretical paradise for trolls, with the freedom it allows players with their actions and interactions with other players. Though the game does possess a language filter and the presence of game masters who can ban players if necessary, the ability to troll is made quite easy because of the room players are given to do what they want.

This freedom gives them multiple options to accomplish their trolling, options that are explored in Anna Dreiling's study, “Please Feed the Trolls”. In this paper, Dreiling investigates what the most common methods of trolling are, using surveys and in-game playing to find what is the most popular way to affect another's playing

experience. It finds where they are most collected in the game, and where they are the most sparse. Dreiling's study came up with some interesting results, with the one of the biggest findings being that trolling comments that were related to external material (those not pertaining to the game itself) incited the biggest responses from players, rather than comments about internal sources, albeit by a 10% margin. She also found that comments related to feminism were the ones that brought out the most anger from other players. She also found that most players interviewed stated that while external trolling does elicit more of a response due to its attacking of a person's beliefs and personal morals, it is also the most obvious since it does not fit in with the game world.

While this information is useful in studying where trolls appear and what damage they can cause, it does not discuss the reasons as to why they are trolling. This notion is what our current study looks to answer. Having engaged in our own trolling throughout the years, we find that all too often, when we are performing the trolling, we don't know why we are doing it, other than to laugh at others' reactions. This could be the reason for trolls to appear. But with the example of Joaquin Phoenix, it's shown that there are other reasons out there for trolling. These reasons vary in degree, as does the trolling that occurs because of them. We troll for the entertainment from others' reactions, but Phoenix did it in order for a movie and a statement to be made. There could be numerous other reasons as well: trolling for personal gain (i.e. equipment and weapons in terms of games), revenge for a past action taken against them. There's no set motivation for trolling. The reasons are unclear and foggy. Clearing the fog is what we are aiming to achieve with this study.

Method

Due to the broad nature of trolling using strictly quantitative research was inadequate in finding the answer. Thus, quantitative research and, primarily, qualitative research was used.

In describing how the research was carried out, it is important to define the two phases of the study that we used. The first phase was comprised of preliminary surveys and interviews. These were designed to help give a general consensus as to the most common reaction and experiences with trolling. The survey was comprised of questions designed to single out where trolling occurred, how effective it was, and generally to find a reason for the trolling on a superficial level. The survey was sent out over the social networking website Facebook, as many people we know are gamers who have been exposed to trolling in some way. They also represent a wide variety of gamers, each with their own tastes in gaming, which would help give diversity to the results and opinions we would gather. Our aim was to garner results from a certain number of people to take part in the survey, in hopes of gaining a greater difference between opinions. With this data gathered, we moved on to the interviews. At the end of the survey, we left an option for those who took it to let us know if they'd be willing to be interviewed as well about their trolling experiences. The goal of the interview was to gain a more in-depth description of trolling encounters from those we have already gathered information from. Again we had a minimum amount we hoped to get involved. Once the interview was completed, we analyzed the data from both it and the survey. Though our results contained the general qualitative research from the survey, the qualitative data we

gathered from the interviews, along with the fact that we knew those being questioned on a personal level, hopefully helped us gain a more intimate detailing of the trolling that has happened.

This mixed-bag of data we collected helped us to gain a general idea for when we initiated phase two of our research: in-game trolling. We believed that one of the best ways for us to find what it is about trolling that causes players to begin trolling, was to do it ourselves, and thus get “into the mind” of a troll. Much like the cliché belief of getting to know someone by “walking a mile in their shoes”, we hoped to learn about trolls by doing just that: becoming one of them.

When we eventually entered the game world ourselves after completing the first phase of our research, it was a very quick process to gather the data we wanted. We immediately went to the nearest city where we believed we could find the greatest number of players. With the high population in this area, compared to the other locations we had been, the availability of people to troll increased.

Due to unfortunate limitations that will be detailed in the Results section, we could only really rely on two types of trolling: communication through chat and physically hindering another player. We also followed the same kind of process that we developed as we played. The process is described as follows:

We would start our trolling by finding a player randomly, preferably one that looked to be of a higher level than us. Once a target was found, we would then start out with subtle trolling. This took the form of us following the player around. We wouldn't say anything to them or try to initiate any kind of confrontation, but just stay off to the side, but always going where they went. Judging by what kind of response came from

this action, we would then proceed to become more intrusive by trying to physically halt their movement by standing in their way or any other ways we could find. After doing this, we would then start up verbal communication through the chat function of the game, sending out short messages of “Hey!” or “Helloooo!” constantly, hoping to annoy them in some way with the repetition. The final step of our trolling process was to increase the extremity, and admittedly the vulgarity, of our messages. We hoped that this would create more of an uprising from the player to gain a response.

This process was followed through with a few different players that we found. It served as a way for us to fully understand what it is like to be a troll, and what it is that causes people to do it.

Results

The results of the research are referenced to by which phase of the research they fell into: Phase 1 or Phase 2.

Phase 1

The surveys and interviews gave us some interesting data, though should be interpreted carefully, as there could be complications in their validity that will be discussed in the later Discussion section. The amount of participants of our survey did not, unfortunately, meet our goal, coming up slightly short (N=17). But out of these 17 participants, all of them answered “Yes” to our first question of whether or not they have been affected by a bothersome player in-game. But with every participant having been affected by a troll, only a small section (18%) found the troll to be truly intrusive to their

experience, with a majority (53%) claiming that their impact was not substantial. The results to this question can be seen in Figure 1.

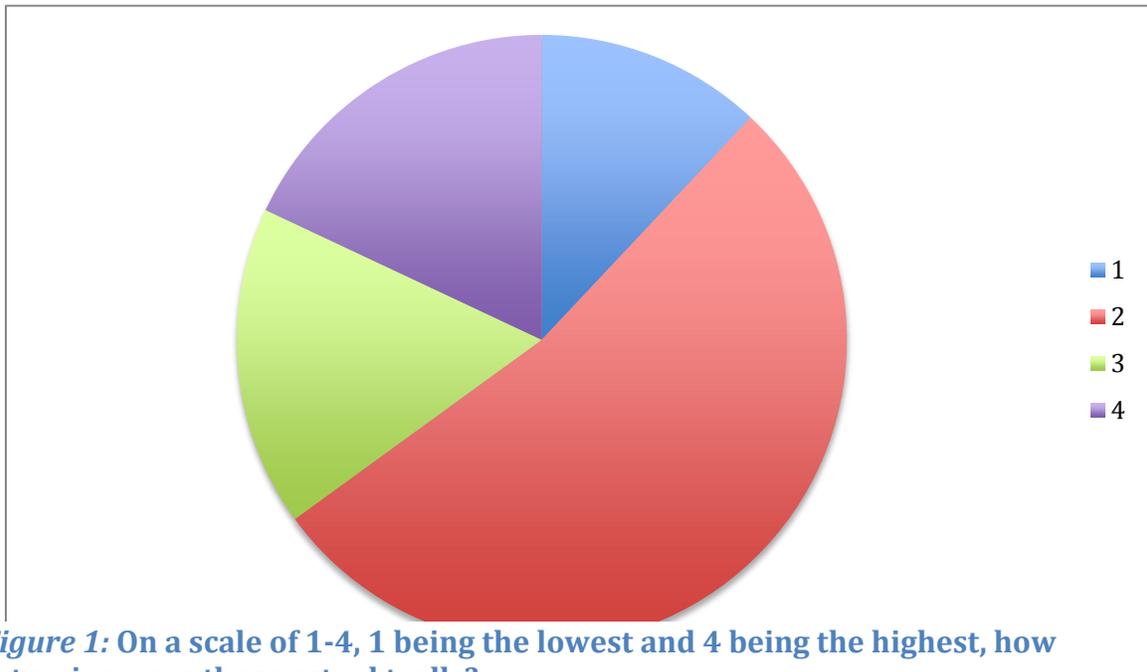


Figure 1: On a scale of 1-4, 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest, how intrusive were these actual trolls?

A later question asked participants to indicate all the tactics that trolls have used to hinder their gameplay. The results of this question (shown in Figure 2) were quite varied. The participants were given five different tactics: chat, interaction, cheating, AFK (Away From Keyboard), or other. Results showed that a most of the players (n=13) selected chat, while the option that selected the least amount (5) was other. This shows that most trolls tend to use the game equivalent of verbal communication.

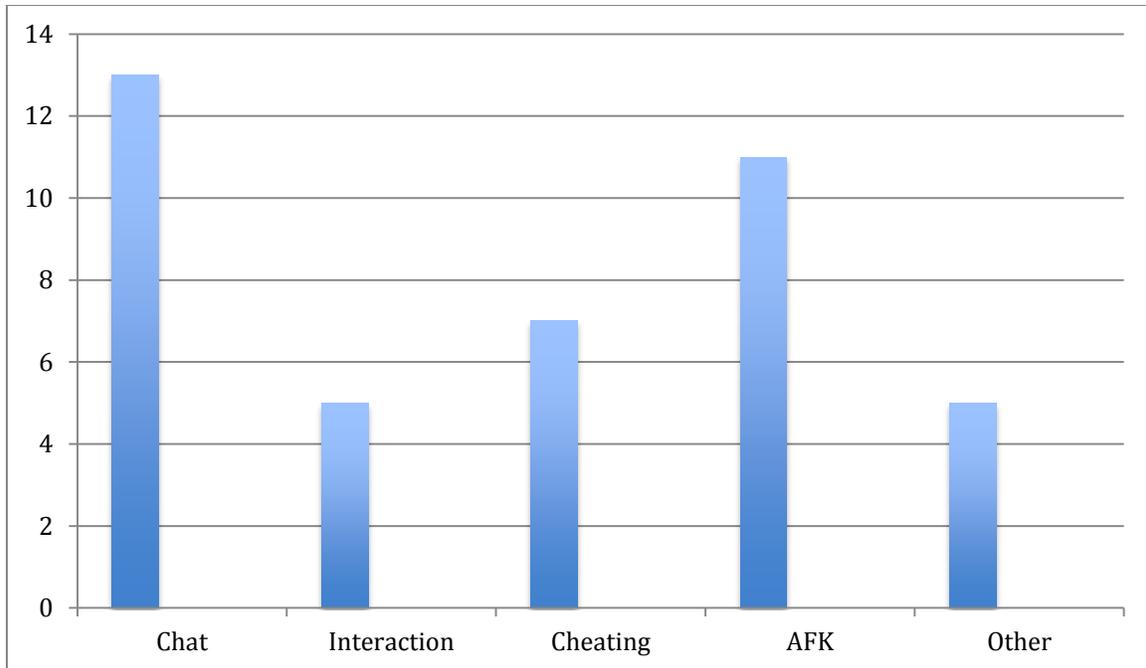


Figure 2: What tactics did the trolls use to hinder your gameplay? (Check all that apply)

This data serves to help us understand the best way for us to troll in the game ourselves, the results of which will be detailed later on. Another question also served to help us with this, which asked in which parts of the game the participants encountered trolls the most, asking them to select all that applied. The responses showed that PvP (Player vs. Player) was the area where trolls were most abundant, with the option of “Other” (a section of the game not listed) bringing earning the fewest responses once again. Due to this response, it is evident that trolls prefer to play in a place where they can directly affect another player, rather than indirectly through chat or trade (See Figure 3 for exact numbers).

The interviews helped us to gain a more personal and honest recollection of experiences with trolls. The questions followed the same basic format of the survey

questions, but this time asking the participants to cite an example from their game

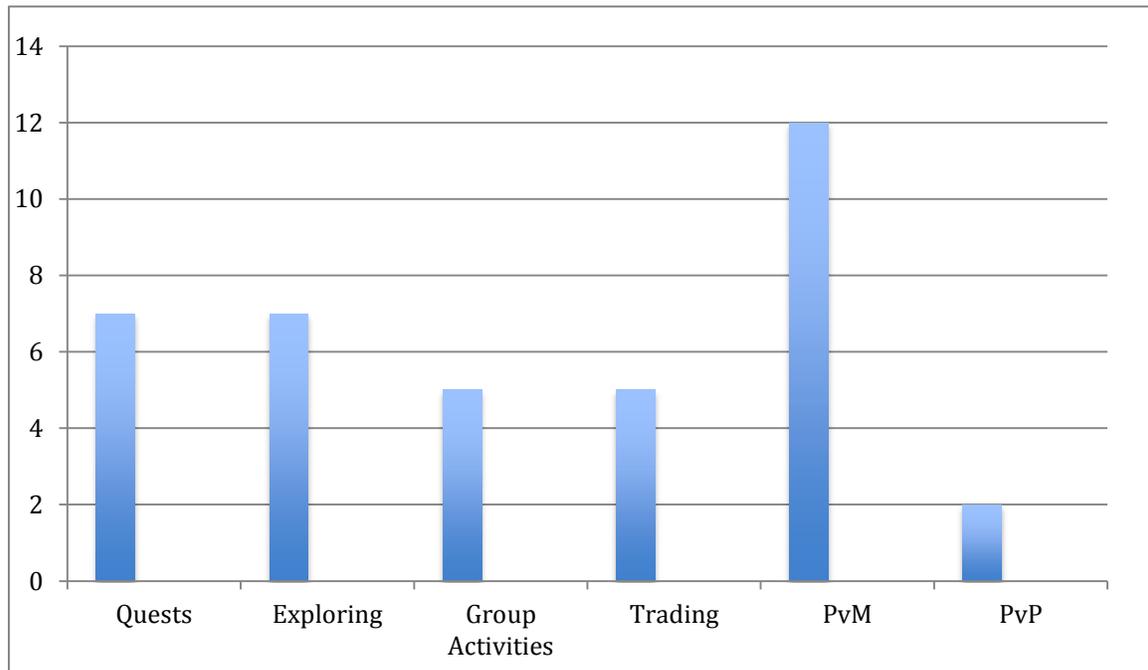


Figure 3: In what parts of the game do you encounter trolls the most?

playing.

An interesting result we found from the interviews is that all of the people we interviewed (n=3) found trolling to be entertaining, depending on the circumstance. They all said that while the trolls were intrusive, they did not hinder the game to a great degree, something that supports that data previously gained from the survey. They also claimed to enjoy seeing a troll be out-trolled, as a way of retaliation from the victim.

Another over-arching response was from the question, what do you think the purpose of trolling is. All the participants that we interviewed said that they believed it was for entertainment purposes and that the responses and reactions from those that they troll is what feeds them to keep going. They all claimed to have found it amusing themselves and anticipated more trolling to occur.

The final important piece of data that the interviews gave us was when the participants were asked about their own trolling that they've committed, they all gave an example that resulted in them enjoying it because those who they were trolling reacted in an aggressive way.

Phase 2

Before the results of our in-game trolling are given, it's important to note that we had a large restriction when it came to being able to troll effectively. We are both new players in WoW, and have not spent much time playing. Thus, our levels are low and our abilities are as well. We don't have a very strong familiarity with the game and how it works, so we weren't able to get involved in trading, dungeon raiding, or other activities such as those. Being amateurs in the game, our trolling was limited to the small process described before in the "Method" section.

When we carried out our process, we found the same response from the players we were harassing: nothing. Every player just ignored us and never tried to acknowledge our existence. No matter what we did or said, they just continued on their way. They never fought back or attacked us, but just kept playing as if we weren't there.

This, combined with our lack of skill in the game, caused this phase to be quite short, yet fulfilling in what data we were able to collect from it.

Discussion

The two phases of our research both indicate that the reason trolls keep trolling is because they enjoy the responses from those that they troll.

All participants of the survey admitted to encountering a troll at some point and they all claimed that the best method to stop the troll was to ignore them completely. If this is what causes a troll to stop, this means that gaining no response causes them to be bored and lose the enjoyment they get from the trolling. They strive for a reaction of some sort, for the victim to lash back. Granted, the participants were all players who don't have many encounters with trolls. One participant in an interview, when asked about how frequently he encounters trolls, replied: "I'd say about 25% of the time... 20-25% of the time". So taking the accounts of these players who don't have a great deal of experience with trolls may give us less of an idea, but they still present information that is useful in coming to our conclusion.

Our participants claimed that trolls surfaced more in parts of games where they can interact with other players, and they also claimed that trolls choose individuals rather than groups. By targeting these select people, it can be perceived that they hope to troll on a more personal level, taking the victim on one-on-one. With one person, it would be easier to relentlessly attack them, rather than manage to attack an entire group. Our survey also shows that trolls prefer to troll individuals rather than groups. It also says that they prefer chat as the best method for trolling. Since they prefer the method that best gets a response from their preferred amount of players, it can be believed that they want that reaction, as it's what they troll for.

The notion of trolling for a reaction is even further supported by the personal anecdotes that we were given in our interviews. One interviewee recited a story of when he and his friends decided to completely rush the opponents' base in a game of *Starcraft*, causing one of the opponents to get incredibly angry with them. The player

proceeded to then freak out and send them angry messages, a reaction that the participant and his team-mates enjoyed greatly.

Now, this is a story that comes from a player that hasn't dealt with trolling very much, or so they claim in the interview, so perhaps this feeling of accomplishment when angering another player is just a reward for a troll who is just beginning.

Perhaps the trolling can get boring after awhile when all they're looking for is a violent reaction, and so after awhile, the troll resorts to trolling for other benefits such as loot or abilities.

This question is also important to keep in mind since our low-level characters didn't have the abilities or time to really delve into the action of trolling, we have no idea what prolonged trolling is like or what veteran trolls desire from it. Further research could be done to investigate whether or not this possible divergence is true, or if maybe it's always for the reactions.

One other thing that stands out from the results of our research is that those who we interviewed, though a small number, claimed to have not encountered many trolls during their gaming experiences. With the one participant claiming that they only encounter a quarter of the time they play, at the most, one can't help but wonder if maybe trolling is starting to lose its prominence. It's obviously well-known, not only just in gaming but in other mediums and areas of life as well, so it had a strong presence at some point, possibly due to its extreme nature. But if people aren't seeing it as much anymore, perhaps trolling is dying down and people are giving it less attention.

This lack of attention being paid is evident in our attempts at trolling in the game. What can initially be seen and thought of as a failed attempt at trolling, could

actually be indicative of how people have come to deal with trolls. When comparing this with the trolling we would do before the study, and the reactions we would gain from that, a decrease in responses is obvious. The trolling we did for fun in the past would cause immediate, angry reactions, which is what entertained us. But now when we trolled, there was no response at all. It's a juxtaposition that has a key implication. I think people are starting to pay the trolls less attention, not letting them bother them anymore and causing them to lose focus. Trolling has existed so long, that people have no adapted to it and learned how to deal with it. It doesn't affect them anymore.

If people's response to it is to ignore the trolls, then where do the trolls go? They want the attention and the reaction, but aren't being given them. They're left with no benefits, and so they stop trolling. It's a possibility that would change the landscape and players' general outlook of interactive gaming.

If trolls disappear, then the "Troll Face" meme would be rendered irrelevant, and players wouldn't be afraid to encounter them. Of course, it would allow for trolling to make a resurrection once everyone let their guard down. It's a vicious cycle that trolling exists in, where its power fluctuates repeatedly. Perhaps it's intended, and trolls are just laying idly by while people forget about them, only to come back. Could its disappearance be trolling's greatest achievement?

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