Making Friends Everywhere You Go: A Study on the Social Interactions

Between Reality and Online Gaming

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Introduction

Places such as bars, coffee shops, and parks are common areas where people go to socialize and form new relationships. The World of Warcraft is another social environment that most people probably don't think of when discussing common social areas. However, one of the main functions of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), such as World of Warcraft, is to interact with fellow gamers while playing the game itself. By creating a video game that immerses the player into an online virtual world, that player can then share experiences with fellow gamers, which could include anything from simply chatting with a player in a common social area to playing alongside a team of players that help you defeat monsters and gain experience points easier.

Questions soon arise regarding these social environments: can these two different settings for socializing areas be intertwined? Can the relationships formed in one setting, such as in World of Warcraft, be transferred to another setting, like a coffee shop or park? This is where the research question for this study begins to form. Not only can meaningful relationships be formed in MMORPGs, but can those relationships (friendships, couples, co-workers, etc.) be transferred to the real world?

Various studies in the past have investigated the social aspects of MMORPGs, including how players interact with one another online. One such study was done by Nicolas Ducheneaut, Robert J. Moore and Eric Nickell entitled "Virtual 'Third Places': A Case Study of Sociability in Massively Multiplayer Games". Duchenaut says, "Today Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are extensive, persistent 3D environments that are populated by hundreds of thousands of players at any given moment. The sociable nature of these online spaces is often used to explain their success: unlike previous video games, MMOGs, require players to

exchange information and collaborate in real-time to progress in the game" (129). These online

games are designed specifically to force the player to interact with other players in order to

advance further in the game. The question being researched in this study was whether or not

these social spaces in the online world fir existing definitions of social environments in the real

world.

Figure 1: Players like to joins raids, which allow them to fight alongside other WoW players to try to beat common foes and collect experience points and money.

The authors of this study did their research on an MMORPG called *Star Wars Galaxies*.

They created their own avatars (playable characters that you can customize in the game) and

went to places in the game called "cantinas", which are basically pubs in the game where players

go to socialize and get experience points. Ducheneaut and his team then observed how players

interacted with each other and how they interacted with Ducheneaut and his men, as well.

The results that Ducheneaut found were that online games, such as *Star Wars Galaxies*,

have the potential to replace, or at least supplement the "third places", or social environments, of

the real world. These results are significant because for the most part, social environments in

online worlds had not been studied very extensively before this study. According to Ducheneaut, "Curtis (1992) was one of the first to seriously examine patterns of social interaction in these particular online communities- almost 15 years after the creation of the first MUD. Moreover, research has not really progressed much further since then…" (131).

These results are significant to this study because it is only one of many studies that have examined social interactions between gamers in MMORPGs. However, it also presents a research gap from which this study was created. Ducheneaut's research looked at social interactions solely in online worlds, whereas this study will be observing whether those interactions can convert to the real world and continue to occur.

A second study relating to the current study being researched was done by the Ducheneaut team, as well: Nicolas Ducheneaut, Eric Nickell, Robert J. Moore, and Nicholas Yee. The project was constructed in 2006 and was titled "'Alone Together?' Exploring the Social Dynamics of Massively Multiplayer Online Games". This study had a more general research question, which was to simply, "…study social activities in MMOGs based on longitudinal data collected directly from games," (Ducheneaut 407). According to Ducheneaut, there had been little data available on this subject before this case had been done and so this team had decided to conduct their study on the most successful MMORPG at the time, World of Warcraft.

The results of their case revealed that the extent of social interactions between WoW (World of Warcraft) players varied significantly across the span of their longitudinal study. Ducheneaut writes:

"Our observations show that, while MMOGs are clearly social environments, the extent and nature of the players' social activities differ significantly from previous accounts. In

particular, joint activities are not very prevalent, especially in the early stages of the

game. WoW's subscribers, instead of playing with other people, rely on them as an

audience for their in-game performances, as an entertaining spectacle, and as a diffuse

and easily accessible source of information and chitchat. For most, playing the game is

therefore like being 'alone together'- surrounded by others but not necessarily actively

interacting with them," (Ducheneaut 415).

These results may be quite significant to the current study because they may support the

possibility that relationships cannot transfer from the virtual world to the real world. Ducheneaut

and his team said that although players were surrounded by the presence of other gamers in

WoW, for the most part they chose not to interact with them unless it was necessary or did not

occupy a lot of time. The concept of "chitchat", which would be a short conversation with

another player, would not allow players to become fully acquainted with each other and therefore

would most likely not form a lasting relationship. If this is the case, then relationships could not

translate to the outside world since the relationships did not even form in the first place.

Clearly, Ducheneaut's study forms another research gap where much has been revealed

about the social interactions of players in WoW, but little is known about whether or not those

interactions can create long-lasting relationships, such as friendships or love interests, and if they

can channel out into the real world. Thus, this research project will aim to answer that question.

Nicolas Ducheneaut, Nicholas Yee, Robert Moore, and Eric Nickell conducted another

study that was published in 2007, entitled, "The Life and Death of Online Gaming Communties:

A Look at Guilds in World of Warcraft". Their research was centered around explaining the

success and failure of guilds in WoW and they had conducted research for over 1 year from five

different World of Warcraft servers. Ducheneaut and his team had created avatars in WoW and

had accumulated more than one hundred hours of gameplay for each of them. Each of these four men had also joined guilds that had been successful and some that had failed and died out.

In their long hours of guild watching, the team found smaller subgroups in the guilds, which led to multiple teams being made within one guild. These teams were comprised of members with similar skills and levels, which eventually led to these team members progressing through the game at the same pace and experiencing same encounters and defeats. Specialization among players was also a very common sight, allowing various members in the guild to specialize in different skills (spellcrafting, etc.). This added to the guild's efficiency because various tasks could get done at the same time.

However, Ducheneaut's findings of the study were that although large guilds can be very efficient and provide bonus opportunities to its members, they were very hard to control and maintain. They also determined that there may be an approximate limit on the number of members that a guild can have without failing or being inefficient. Around 35 members was all a guild could sustain.

Although the conclusion and end findings of Ducheneaut's study do not apply to this current study very well, the observations they made regarding the guilds may help support the current study's research question. They saw how closely the members of a team within the large guilds interacted and developed throughout the game. The strong connections between players could possibly prove to support the idea that WoW players extend these strong connections to the outside world.

Another study that relates to the research question being studied in this case was done by Zhi-Jin Zhong and was entitled "The Effects of Collective MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) on Gamers' Online and Offline Social Capital". For this study,

there were two hypotheses possible. As Zhong stated in his research, "There are two possibilities that MMORPG play may elicit impact on offline social capital. The first one is a straightforward effect, that is, the social ties established in MMORPGs directly extend to the real world, or, the successful collaboration in MMORPG guilds and groups directly encourages people to participate in offline civic activities" (2353). In other words, Zhong was attempting to prove that engaging in online social groups, such as guilds, or even just interacting with other players online may have a positive correlation to players engaging in new relationships and interactions in the real world.

Figure 2: Characters have the option to "chat" with other players in teh game by using the chat box seen here in the bottom left corner of the image.

The results that Zhong found were that although "…frequent in-game social interactions and enjoyable social experience in MMORPGs are beneficial to gamers' social networks in the virtual world,", gaming time negatively influenced bonding social capital, bridging social capital and civic engagement, both online and offline (Zhong 2360). Simply put, MMORPG gameplay had no causal relationship to getting the players to be more active in social networks or groups in

the real world. Zhong even attempts to explain this by saying that players have to keep the relationships they have formed online in the online world because it is difficult for them to meet face to face in real life. Other players may get used to this non-physical online relationship and not feel the need to extend it to the outside world. Zhong's conclusion to the study states, "In other words, although MMORPGs can provide a platform for establishing new social ties, whether people expand their online relationships to the offline world depends on specific social context and individuals' social skills," (2360).

Zhong's study has a strong connection to the research question being addressed in this case study because he is observing the effect that online interactions have on offline interactions, which is also what this current study is examining. However, his research method involved asking the participants about online social capital and civic engagement and then asking about offline social capital and civic engagement. Zhong asked these questions separate from each other and then compared the results to see if there was a connection between how they interact online and offline. For example, under the "Virtual Bonding Social Capital" category, Zhong asked questions, such as, "I interact with someone online that would put their reputation on the line for me". Then, under the "Offline Bonding Social Capital" category, he asks questions, such as, "I interact with someone offline that would share their last dollar with me," (2358). Although these questions do help answer his research question and will show either a positive or negative correlation between the online and offline social capital (social networking), that is as far as the results will go. The research method used in this current study will either prove or disprove that online relationships can translate to the real world, rather than only showing a correlation between online and offline social interactions.

Research Method

The data for this study was collected by the use of interviews and surveys. The target group of this study was World of Warcraft players because surveying or interviewing people who have not played WoW would not be able to complete the questionnaire or interview. The questions asked in the interview/survey require that the participant have time spent playing WoW and having knowledge of their interactions, if any, with other players.

A survey was posted online on a website used by students at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado. This website was their class website where all of their materials, grades, and resources were located. This class is a writing class that is based around the World of Warcraft and the students were required to become familiar with the game (creating an avatar and having at least some experience with playing the game). Ideally, all of the participants of this study should therefore have experience with WoW, as well as experience in interacting with other WoW players in the game, although this may not be the case. Also, World of Warcraft players were interviewed in real life in a one-on-one interview with this study's conductor. These participants were asked the same questions as were the participants of the online survey.

The survey/interview itself had both of these aspects in it because it started out with general demographic questions. The participant is asked to read the following paragraph, "By completing the following questions, you are also granting consent for this information to be used as part of a research exercise that I am completing for my WRIT 1133 class. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide may be used in a class project. While profile information may be included in my project (i.e. age, gender, class standing, etc.) your name will NOT be used". After they consent to the interview/survey, demographic questions, such as age, sex, and job/education status, are asked. These questions will help when determining

whether or not the group that was interviewed/surveyed was a good representation of the whole WoW community, since people of all ages play World of Warcraft.

After these general questions are asked, the interview questions come into play. The participant is asked what their main motivation is to play WoW, with three choices to choose from: Achievement/Conquest (fighting for monetary or tangible rewards, experience points, etc.), Immersion (playing the main storyline and building/advancing their character), or Socializing (making friends and joining guilds). This question has serious significance because if the participant answers socializing, they may be playing WoW solely to form relationships with other players. Other questions follow as they become more specific towards answering the research question (all questions asked on the interview are posted in the Results section).

Results

The following chart shows the results of the survey, along with all questions that were asked in the surveys and interviews. For this study, there was no hypothesis created to either support or refute the research question, but rather to simply answer whether or not close relationships formed in WoW tend to translate to become relationships in the real world.

Figure 3: Survey and Interview Questions and Results		
		# of Participants
1. What is your sex/gender?	100% male	24
	0% female	0
2. What is your age?	25%=18 years	6
	50%=19 years	12
	8%=20 years	2
	17%=21 years	4
3. What is your job/eduaction status?		
a. Full-time working	21%	5
b. Part-time working	0%	0
c. Full-time student	58%	14
d. Part-time student	0%	0
e. Part-time working/part-time student	0%	0
f. Unemployed	21%	5
g. Retired	0%	0
4. How long have you been playing WoW? Or if you are no longer playing but did in the past, how long did you play WoW?	21%= < 1 year	5
	50%= > 1 year but < 2 years	12
	29%= > 2 years	7
5. What is your main motivation to play WoW?		
a. Achievement/Conquest (raiding, PvP)	0%	0
b. Immersion (questing, story, character development)	75%	18
c. Socializing (friends, guild)	25%	6
6. When you play WoW, how mcuch do you socialize with other players?		
a. No Socializing, mainly soloing (questing, grinding, farming)	25%	6
b. Some Socializing (chat with friends)	25%	6
c. Moderate Socializing (casual raiding/dungeons, guild chat)	50%	12
d. Heavy Socializing (raid organizing/managing, general/trade chat)	0%	0
7. Would you say you have ever formed a close relationship with another WoW player? (Close friends, love interest, co-workers, etc.)	25% Yes	6
	75% No	18
8. Outside of the game, have you ever met with a fellow WoW player whom you met in WoW itself?	0% Yes	0
	100% No	24
9. If so, did you form an even closer relationship with that player/players? What kind?	100% N/A	24
10. Have you ever been able to find employment with the help and aid of another WoW player?	0% Yes	0
	100 % No	24
11. Have you ever been employed alongside another WoW player whom you met inside WoW itself?	0% Yes	0
	100% No	24
12. Have you ever dated or married another WoW player whom you met online in WoW?	0%Yes	0
	100% No	24

A total of 24 people participated in this study and all participants were male. The age range for the participants was between 18 and 21 years of age and all were either full-time students, full-time working, or unemployed. Five of the participants had been playing WoW for less than one year, while 12 had played for more than one year but less than two years, and 7 had been playing for over two years. Eighteen of the participants (75% of the total population) said that immersion in the game was the greatest motivation for playing WoW, whereas only six of the participants said that socializing was their strongest motivation and none said that achievement and conquest were the biggest motivators.

When asked how much they socialize with other players online, 25% reported that they do very little to no socializing and another 25% said they socialized occasionally. Half of the population responded by saying they socialized quite often, such as in guild chats or communicating with other players when raiding dungeons. None of the interviewees believed they did a heavy amount of socializing while online.

Out of all the participants in this study, only 25% (6 people) reported forming a close relationship in WoW with another WoW player. However, none of the partakers said they had met with a WoW player in real life that they had originally met online in World of Warcraft. Not one of the contributors to this study said they had played alongside a co-worker or found any form of employment from the help of another WoW player. Finally, 100% of the population interviewed/surveyed reported that they had not formed any kind of intimate relationship (dating, marriage) with another World of Warcraft player that they had originally met in WoW, as shown in Figure 3.

Discussion and Conclusion

From analyzing the responses of the participants, it is clear that relationships formed inside WoW tend to not transfer to the outside world. This conclusion directly supports the findings of Zhi-Jin Zhong's study on gamers' online and offline social capital and these results may be explained similarly, as well. Zhong proposed possible explanations as to why players keep their real life and virtual life relationships separate. One of these explanations was that people tend to feel more comfortable interacting with people online and not getting that "face time" with people. This may be because they have busy schedules and have little time for balancing between virtual and real life relationships or that they simply are uncomfortable with the thought of meeting someone they have only known through text chats and raids in World of Warcraft.

When asked about the main motivation to play WoW, the majority of the interviewees responded that it was immersion into the storyline and character development. Only 25% said that socializing was their main drive to play online. These results support Ducheneaut and his team's conclusion in their "Alone Together" study. Like previously stated, they reached the consensus that WoW players were thrown into the mix with thousands of other WoW players, but had little interaction with them. This suggests that immersion into the main story quests was the players' primary objective and socializing with others was a side mission that they indulged in from time to time.

As far as the questions specifically asking about close relationships that the participants formed with other players, all were answered with a resounding NO. They had not met with players outside of the game, found employment from another player, or started any kind of intimate relationship with a fellow WoW player. This was a surprising find because although the

sample of people interviewed was somewhat small, the unanimous "no's" hinted that these are not common practices.

With that being said, this study could have been done more efficiently and had stronger results. One of the weaknesses of this study was the sample size. The results of twenty-four contestants did answer the research question being asked in this study, but the strength of that answer was not all that solid. Obtaining a sample size of around 50 participants would provide a very strong base for answering the research question and providing large numbers of data.

Another weakness in the foundation of this project was the sample of people themselves. All that were surveyed/interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 21, which is a very small age range. Considering that there were 10.2 million WoW subscribers as of December of 2011, the age range for all those gamers is undoubtedly very young to very old (WoW Insider). This difference of 3 years is a very small age range, but can be explained. The website on which the survey/interview was posted, as was previously said, is used exclusively by college students in the WRIT 1133 class. Therefore, the only people who had access to the survey were young adults in this age range. This explains why the majority of the sample selected "full-time student" as their job/education status. Even the 21% who said they were "full-time working" and other 21% who said they were "unemployed" must have been full-time students, as well but may have chosen both if they had had the option.

This study examined the research question of whether or not friendships, intimate relationships, and relationships among co-workers can extend to the outside world and continue to be upheld in real life. Based on the findings of the sample that was interviewed and surveyed, the answer to the question is that these relationships tend to not transfer into reality. Furthermore,

relationships made in World of Warcraft tend to be kept separate from any lasting relationships

in the real world.

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