

All by Myself: Playing Alone in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*

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Abstract:

The author looks to develop an ethnography looking for patterns in playing the game *World of Warcraft*, specifically looking for reasons and experiences that would explain her choice to play this game alone as often as possible. This study provides her findings in the phenomenon of solo play in a massively multiplayer world, and how stress and character choice affect it.

Introduction:

People around the world play Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (known hereafter as MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*. As of last year, Blizzard's game has 5.5 million subscribers, many of whom may have multiple characters on multiple realms. Realms within the game have three types:

The first is player versus environment (PVE) in which the player uses their avatar to interact with non-player characters (NPCs) to complete quests, or interact with other players to complete dungeons or raids- instances within the game with more powerful beasts. This realm also allows 'solo' players- players who prefer to play the game alone- the most freedom to play the game however they want.

The second type is player versus player (PVP) where players focus a majority of their time on leveling their character and killing players of the other faction (ten 'races' are split into two 'factions' - Alliance and Horde). This server is more restrictive than PVE, as players who

log on at peak times often spend their time being killed by higher level players, or patrolling the enemy faction's low-level areas in groups.

The third type is a Roleplaying server (RP). This server is perhaps the most restrictive of the three. Blizzard has strict guidelines for naming conventions of the characters, there are rules to how one should act. Many of the groups that engage in immersive role-playing on these servers are exclusive if not secretive, and it can be difficult to begin playing on these realms without knowing people there first.

This game has personally intrigued me since I was a young girl. I began playing on an account my babysitter allowed me and the other children she watched to play on. At the time, it was just one of many video games I played, something that was fun. As I played more and got my own account, the game began to be a good way to relax from day to day stresses. *World of Warcraft* has since become a both a joy and a vice in my life. Growing up, my mother became an addict to the game. For several years, I swore off paying for the game and only recently have I begun to pay for the game again. As a college student, and having played on and off for several years, I felt compelled to take a research course based off the game.

Everyone, from psychologists to parents, is interested in the reasons why people play games such as this. The motivations for looking into this and other games range from the type of social interaction in games like *World of Warcraft* (Cole, Griffiths) to worries about if these games cause violent behavior (Grodal).

My interest in this area of research stems from several areas, but started with Nicolas Ducheneaut et al's (2006) research on motivations for playing the game. While their study focused on motivations for playing the game, one of the variables they looked at was quests in the game. Having just done my own research on quests, this piqued my interest. As a long term

player who spends much of my time in game alone, Ducheneaut's research struck me. What struck me was the data he presented that suggested that players don't usually level in groups until after level 55, "where dungeons are simply too difficult to enter alone." (Ducheneaut et al., 2006, 4). While I have played for a decade, I have never leveled a character to or past level 55. Others have researched similar topics, such as Zhi-jin Zhong's study on social capital both on and offline which claimed that while the sample was not fully representative, his data suggested that collaborative playing in MMORPGs positively affects social bonds both in and out of the game as well as positive affects "online civic engagement" (Zhong, 2011, 8), and Jonas Linderoth's ethnography on roleplayers and their dynamics in game, specifically looking at the difficulty to roleplay online and how the subjects of his study seem to reject the previous multi-layered experience theories of Fine (1983) while embodying Murray's (1997) theories on actively creating believe (Linderoth, 2012, 16). All this research deals with the motivations and actions of players in *World of Warcraft* and other games, which made me wonder about my own motivations for playing. Specifically, what are the reasons for how and why I play the game?

For this study, I planned to look at gameplay as I participant observer, as well as the primary subject for a week. As a long-time subscriber and player, I wanted to use this study to look at the pattern of my gameplay and see firstly, if there are any discernible patterns to begin with, and secondly what these potential patterns mean when it comes to how and why I play.

Methods:

For this study, I was observing my own actions as I play the game *World of Warcraft* over a period of a week and a half. To observe these actions and still maintain the most natural playing environment possible, I use a voice recording application on an iPad which is located out

of my immediate line of sight whenever I began to play. Recording my gameplay also allows me to observe my patterns and analyze after playing.

Every day that I play, I begin the recording by asking three to four questions to set the tone of the play for that day. I record the day of the week, day of the study, and the time of day. After this, I record my mood and relative stress level. For the stress level, I used a descriptive scale (i.e. “not very stressed”) to measure it, as measuring a feeling on a scale of one to ten is extremely subjective. While this is an study of myself, assigning stress a number of, for example, seven, means nothing to someone reading or analyzing the study. Additionally, a question such as ‘how stressed do you feel?’ will mean something different depending on the day and my mood- a ‘1’ on day two may be the same as a ‘4’ on day six.

During gameplay, I will remain focused on and play the game in much the same way as I would before and will after the study. The only break in concentration then comes from any real-time analysis I do in response to game interactions, as well as conversations outside the scope of the study— as a college student playing the game in my dorm room, there will be times my roommate or other friends are in the room. While their presence is inevitable, I have played the game around and with others for several years. This might present a problem for a newer player, or someone who is easily distracted from the game, but will not be for me.

Results and Discussion:

For my research, I played on the North American server Suramar, where I have played since I was a child. During the week and a half I recorded data, I played on only two of my nine characters on the realm: Eonys, a level 100 Night Elf balance Druid, and Tàlirel, a Blood Elf beast mastery Hunter who was at level 27 when the study began.

As the week and a half period for my research came to an end, I was disappointed to find that I had only played five days of the eleven I set for myself to study. While this means less data to analyze, it also presents an interesting pattern to analyze within itself. I played five of the ten to eleven days, for anywhere from a half-hour to an hour. As a college student, I find this makes a lot of sense. The game, for me at least, has never held an addicting or ‘needy’ place in my life. I associate the game with relaxation and fun, especially during times when I’m stressed or burned out due to college classes, work, or family issues. By only adding in another step to my ‘ritual’ of playing, this means that the game is not as important to me as it used to be when I was younger, or else that it is just a lower priority during the months I study. The fact that I found time to play at least half of those days, however, suggests that I still find the game as a good stress reliever. For me, at least, the game relieves stress but not necessarily in the healthiest way: the game gives me a way to distance myself from my numerous stressors (many of which I have trouble identifying day to day), and decompress by engaging me in a task that doesn’t involve studying or intense focus.

On the days I did play, I found a couple interesting patterns. Firstly, I found that most days I classified myself as being slightly to somewhat stressed. Considering in day to day life I would often say I am somewhat to very stressed, this surprised me greatly. I can’t tell if the game was already influencing my stress levels, or if I was reducing my own scale of stress in response to the research. I also found that I gave a very consistent reason for my stress: final exams. In four of the five recordings, I directly or indirectly reference “finals” as one of my stressors.

To better track these and other patterns, I transcribed my answers and any time I talked in a second document. One thing I noticed is every day, I played the game for anywhere to roughly 40 to 80 minutes, with most days having at least 3-4 notes besides login and logout. However, on

day five (The only day where I did not reference exams), the only notes I had were on login and logout.

The most reasonable explanation I can think of for this stark change is that talking—regardless of whether or not the speech was about the stressor or not— helps me relax in some way. This would explain why I would talk during game play when I was playing alone or with strangers. Another possible explanation could be that as my characters are max level and just under level 30, the game is tedious, even if relaxing. To help with the boredom that spawned from this tedious play, I would talk, hum, or speak in a sing-song voice. Doing this would occupy my mind just enough to keep the game interesting and my attention focused on the game.

Another trend I noticed was that every day I recorded data, I classified my mood as ‘content’ or ‘good’. This strikes me as particularly interesting because at least two of the days, I had either received bad news or previously had been in a particularly bad mood due to issues I had experienced throughout my day (hence, one of the reasons I would turn to the game in the first place). I believe I could have inflated my actual mood in the same way that I possibly altered or minimized my stress levels due to being in front of or knowing that I would soon be playing World of Warcraft.

I said something offhandedly on the first day of play that at the time seemed insignificant. However, after reviewing the recordings while looking specifically at any mention of me playing with others, it became very significant. Just thirty seconds into playing Eonys, after commenting that I had would be working on things in my garrison first, I brought up one of my ‘followers.’ As people play the last expansion of the game, players can create outposts in the alien world (known as a Garrison), and can collect people who will follow you and do tasks you set for them. One such task can be performing the actions of a bodyguard. A follower who acts as your

bodyguard follows you anywhere in the alien world, helping you battle enemies. On the first day of play, I mentioned that, “[it] is kinda nice that I have someone to play with and follow me around even though I don’t have to actually interact with him,” (2:11 pm, May 10th).

During my gameplay, I had two experiences which really struck me. The first occurred on day two of the study, at about the three-quarter mark of the recording (total time of play was 61:36, my real-time analysis occurred starting around the 45 minute mark). While playing my level 27 (at the time) Blood elf Hunter, Tàlirel just outside of the town of Tranquillien, I ventured into an area of the map known as the Dead Scar to work on a daily quest (Rotting Hearts). After several minutes of seeing no other players, and just before I was going to log off, I received an invite by a Blood Elf Paladin named Brittànnny to a guild (Bloodlust Otherhood). As a mainly Alliance player (out of roughly twenty characters across three realms, I have three Horde characters, the highest level of which is Tàlirel), I had decided that I would not actively pursue or join a guild until I was a higher level. This was because if my characters stay a low level, or I become uninterested in them, I delete them without much consideration. With this in mind, I didn’t want to join a guild or make any clear ties if I was going to then delete the character and make another, or go back to Alliance.

Upon receiving the invitation to Bloodlust Otherhood, I whispered (in-game private messaged) the character who invited me, explaining I did not like random guild invites and asking why she had invited me in the first place. Her response upset me, as “she called me rude and she basically took back the invitation. And her explanation for it is she wants someone to run her secondary guild so she just invites everyone and anyone.” Her explanation as to why she found me rude upset me as well- she found me rude because I had asked her why she invited me without warning, a prior message, or any sort of prompting. What upset me most about the

interaction was that “ [it’s] a perfectly logical question, when ...you get an invite for a random guild you’ve never heard of by a character you don’t know. And that is the same as someone in real life walking up to you and saying ‘hey, you’re invited to this party.’ Of course your first question is going to be ‘why?’” (6:19pm , May 14th, 2016). Normally, an issue like this would (and should) not have annoyed or aggravated me in the slightest. I think part of the reason it aggravated me so easily is the fact that I was slightly more stressed than normal due to the fact I was informed about several family issues. With an already shortened temper due to this increased stress, many things that wouldn’t necessarily upset me normally would be more likely to upset or affect my gameplay.

This interaction showed me one reason I didn’t like playing with others in video games such as these: in the same way that full roleplay immersion is difficult in a text-based game, it’s so easy to misconstrue a question, remark, or even silence in a text-based chat. Whether it’s a question typed in shorthand due to being in a fight, or being in a major city and missing their last whisper, every keystroke has unintended implications. This is why if I usually play with people I know in game- such as members of the guild Mythic Misfits (my level 100 druid, Eonys’ guild), I use a VOIP (voice over internet protocol) program such as Ventrilo. Whether it’s for a raid, an achievement, or just to chat, Ventrilo allows for two things: the only communication issues come from how a person speaks and acts in game, and the formation of friendships with stronger bonds. Being able to speak to others about both the game and real life makes a difference in both in-game efficiency and relationships.

This is part of the reason I have not completely given up on playing with others in-game. While I only played with other players on Tàlirel, in the past I have run dungeons and raids with Mythic Misfits on Eonys. The patience and support of the guild members I played with

encourages me to play with others when possible. However, the level gap needs to be taken into account. Eonys is a max-level character, and as such, can do more. Since my mother also plays in the guild, and has played for as long as I have, many of my relationships in game stem from being “Gwenar’s daughter.”

With Tàlirel, it seems these relationships don’t cross factions. Playing mainly alone while I attempt to level her up without ‘boosting’ (Paying \$60 to Blizzard to jump the character to max-level, with higher gear and profession levels), it can make things difficult and tedious. One of the easiest ways to level characters up when you play alone is through running a randomly selected dungeon. While doing so can level a character anywhere from two to five levels (depending on rested experience, number of enemies killed, quests done within the dungeons, etc.), it can also aggravate a player to the point where running dungeons isn’t the best option.

An experience I had on day four of the study is a clear example of this issue. While running Tàlirel through Black Fathoms Deep with a random group, there was a particular player, an undead mage, who clearly wanted to get through the dungeon for the achievement. The other four of us had not done the dungeon before, and had stopped before the second to last boss. We discussed and agreed upon circling back, killing an optional boss, and then killing the boss before us. Just as we left to do so, the undead mage ‘pulled’ (Began to attack) the second to last boss. What frustrated me was that, “He basically said screw the bonus boss, he doesn’t drop items and I don’t want to do him, I don’t care if you guys need exp. And since he had pulled and we were nice and didn’t want him to die, we lost our chance at the bonus boss.” (3:17pm, May 16th, 2016).

I had planned to do more dungeons, even if they were with different groups. This experience, however, frustrated me to the point that I reported the player (as did the Tank of the

group, and the Healer), and left the group. For the next half hour of playing, I was almost solely focused on forgetting and relaxing from the dungeon experience. This is part of the reason most of my time on Tàlirel is spent doing professions or running quests. Bad experiences with players such as these leave a far greater impact on my own playing style than good experiences.

I also noticed that I often played Tàlirel for longer than I played Eonys. On the one day I only played Tàlirel (day five), I played for just under an hour. On days two through four of the study, I played anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes. On the day where I played only Eonys (day one), I only played for forty minutes, half of which was spent not playing at all, but trying to find a rare monster by googling his location (my in game application which usually does this for me couldn't locate this particular monster), and comparing it to the in-game map .

This pattern makes sense to me, as Eonys is a max-level character. While there is much to do on her, I don't like to do gray or green quests on any of my characters (grey means the quest is far below my level and green means it is below my level, 'very easy' and 'easy' respectively). Because of this choice, I often find myself doing nothing but starting missions and work orders, as well as collecting from my garden and mine.

Tàlirel gives me much more freedom to play with as she's only one-fifth of the way to max-level. As she approaches levels I've not played before (I have never played a character levels from 40-89), the game becomes interesting again, even if a little tedious. Also, since dungeons are a familiar facet in the game, using them to level up makes sense and can be the easiest route, even if taking breaks is necessary.

With Eonys, there are two facets of the game that can be considered equivalent to 'dungeons': the world rares (elite-class monsters that need between three and seven players to take down. Getting just one hit allows the collection of loot after the monster is killed, and as

such it is normal to find between ten and twenty players on a single rare) and raids (five to forty man groups of players who work together to take down ‘bosses’ which are more difficult to fight, often using special moves capable of killing everyone at once). Raiding is on an entirely separate level, and can only be compared to dungeons by the fact they have enemies and quests.

Raiding, even at the ‘normal’ level, is taken seriously and if one does poorly, there is a very good chance one will not be invited back, and will have to turn to LFR (Looking For Raid). While LFR works and creates working groups to take on these dungeons, I find LFR difficult as many people there expect you to understand the mechanics of the encounters before signing up to take them on. As an inexperienced raider, this tendency to expect experience before the encounter makes me turn away from this system. Since Eonys only has these options, playing lower level characters is more fun, generally. Dungeons can take as little as fifteen minutes, whereas raids can take four hours or longer.

Additionally, I have only ever raided once. This one raid took three hours and our group did not even complete four boss fights. While the guild members I played with did a good job of explaining the bosses’ abilities, where to move and such, the fact we did not even get a third of the way through the experience turned me away from running raids, regardless of the group I play with. This means my options for playing Eonys are even more limited than before, and could explain why I play her less than Tàlirel.

This study revealed several things: I don’t play as often as I thought I did, I don’t like to play with others, and I don’t play for long periods of time (‘long’ being two or more hours). The game can become a chore, rather than a tool for relaxation as well and yet. The people in the game can annoy and upset me to the point I log out. Despite this, I continue to play the game at least twice a week. Having seen these patterns laid out makes me wonder why I continue to play,

though I get frustrated by playing with others in a multi-player game. I believe that it comes down to the fact that I don't know the people I'm interacting with. Playing a game like this with several friends should encourage me to play longer (friends at the same level would want to do dungeons, take down rares, and another group activities). Without having those connections to other players, it can limit my own ability to play at higher levels. At lower levels, the issue is not having friends to play with, but that not knowing the players around me allows me to ignore them and their actions more easily. At lower levels, it can be much easier to level up and play the game while still avoiding group quests or activities. If a player were to upset me when I play at these levels, I know I can logout and take time to relax and forget about the incident. However, being upset is a state I try to avoid, so being upset to the point I have to logout is something I try to avoid as often as possible.

These patterns could have several explanations, but seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Due to the limited time for the study, the incredibly small pool of data to analyze, and the context around the situations which aggravated and detracted from my gaming experience, it would be irrational and premature to say there is a clear cut generalization to be found in the data. Over the ten to eleven day period, I played a mere 4.62 hours. A study such as this needs much more data over a longer period- ideally a minimum of 10 hours over a more consistent playing schedule or else over an extended period of data collection. Therefore, there are a few problems with the study that caused or stemmed from this limited data.

The first is that any conclusions or analysis based off of this data set cannot be generalized even to next week. For every 'bad' experience in the game, there is often one to four 'good' experiences that were not properly recorded or that did not fall inside the study's time

range. Because of the length of time the study was conducted in, there simply is not enough data to make any statements as to the reasoning or causes behind my gameplay.

The second is that I had an outcome in mind before I completed the research. While having a hunch as to what the outcome might be is fine in a study with qualitative and quantitative data that does not involve the researcher, when the researcher is the source of the data, this can drastically affect both the data and the analysis of the data. When combined with the length of time the study was conducted, there is simply too great of a chance that my personal ideas as to what the outcome (and the reasoning behind the outcome) should be. Therefore, taking all of this into consideration, the study must ultimately be deemed as inconclusive.

In the future, I hope to conduct a longer study with a more precise set of data points to look for, as well as more consistent play to see if there really is a pattern to how I play.

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