

## Introduction: Online game players and social contexts

Players of massively multiplayer online games have to master a meta-game of learning social norms and exercising an ability to move through different social circles in order to successfully progress with in-game goals. Certain players can navigate this social networking meta-game with much more ease than others, but their success isn't based on individual aptitude alone. I believe these social circles might partly be extensions of existing social hierarchies of off-screen life. To successfully navigate them, then, is in part achieving a certain level of social mobility. This work proceeds from the frame that how and whether a particular player learns to participate in the community's practices is bound up in layers of socio-political dynamics—relationships and positions that afford different levels of power—that originate from both in and out-of-game contexts. I believe the role of education includes enabling people to be in control of their own social mobility. More than just helping people move up in a social hierarchy, however, education should also strive to help people understand, critique, and change the very nature of their social world. Yet, without intervention, online games culture, by emerging as part of popular culture, is at a crucial point where the inequalities of everyday offline life will continue to be replicated in online life. I believe this has huge implications for research into how virtual teams can and should operate.

My research serves two major functions: 1) to study how groups of players learn to work with each other in shared elective activities and 2) to ask how players can be empowered and mobilized and be catalysts of change in both on *and* off-screen life by understanding their position within a broader social context. Many businesses and community organizations depend on teams of people to work on joint projects. Understanding how certain players worked and learned to work together could be a powerful way of understanding how teams could be

structured and managed in non-game settings. Furthermore, I believe some social problems exist because not enough people are carefully reflecting on their actions and consequences affecting the communities around them nor are they critically examining their social conditions. Looking at specific groups of players and their socio-political contexts can help researchers understand how they learned teamwork as participants within a larger social world. This understanding is necessary before any sort of intervention for social change can occur (Freire, 1970/2000)

### Research Questions

1. How did two specific groups of players in the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* communicate and learn to work as teams to complete shared tasks?
2. What kinds of socio-political structures existed between these players, and how did these structures affect the ways in which the players understood their roles and participated within the larger groups?
3. How were certain players marginalized or silenced by the established social norms of the groups, especially in times of frustration or conflict?

### A *World of Warcraft* teamwork primer

Following a long tradition of role-playing games (c.f., *Dungeons & Dragons*), *World of Warcraft* (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) depicts a Tolkienesque medieval fantasy world full of monsters and conflicting factions vying for power. Players create a character or avatar to live and participate in this world. Each character has a specialized profession or role (e.g., a brawny warrior, a backstabbing rogue, a devout healer) and begins the game with particular weapons, armor, and abilities with the goal of completing tasks or quests. As a character completes quests, he or she accrues "experience points" and becomes more powerful, able to use more effective abilities. Additionally, the corpses of monsters that are defeated can be looted for

more powerful weapons and armor. Many of the quests involve fighting particular monsters and are designed to be challenging for teams of players rather than individual players. As such, they are too difficult for a single player to attempt, but they also offer up more rewarding loot.

To team up, the character joins a group of up to five characters known as a "party." Generally, the party goes to the same places and works on the same quests together. Finding party members to team up with can be easy or frustrating depending on social circumstances. Realizing that some players are not as socially adept as others, Blizzard Entertainment, the game developer, reminds players with a loading screen tip to behave courteously to other party members and mark certain characters as friends to party with again.

The most difficult tasks in the game are found in certain "high-end" dungeons that are designed for multiple parties joined together as a raid group. Characters who join these raids have reached the maximum power allowed through gaining experience points (i.e., they are at the high end of the ability curve). The only way for them to become more powerful is by gaining better loot found in these high-end dungeons. For some of the encounters a group will face, it is important to compose the party or raid with favorable proportions of the different character classes. For example, it is often necessary to have a warrior in the party to take the brunt of the blows from the monsters since a warrior has high stamina and is allowed by the game to wear plate armor, and it is also important to have someone who can heal the other party members when they take damage.

Often a character is invited or allowed to join a raid group only if he or she meets the raid's requirements in terms of his or her character class in relation to the existing composition of the raid. This works under the assumption that the player is skilled and familiar with the game mechanics to play effectively. It is not the only factor, however. Generally, preference is given

to friends or at least non-strangers who meet the class requirement. The access players have is as much determined by their character classes and personal skills as by their social relations to the other players. Not all players manage to gain access to raids.

More permanent groups called "guilds" can be formed among players. These are affiliations that persist across game sessions and allow communication between players of the same guild even if they are not currently in the same parties. Many players (and researchers) conflate raid groups and guilds, assuming raids are always composed of players from the same guild. This assumption exists in part because some of the more driven raid groups are made up of guilds that have identified themselves as "hard-core raiding guilds," and the game developers support this association implicitly. For example, they offer tools on the official *World of Warcraft* website to keep track of guilds and guild progression in terms of the loot that guild members have acquired without differentiating which raid groups those guild members were part of. Indeed, there are many other types of guilds that don't focus on guild raiding, including "family-friendly" ones that emphasize shared experiences and positive environments and "role-playing" guilds that emphasize players *acting* as the characters they control and staying "in character."

It can take several months for a raid to learn how to clear a dungeon in *World of Warcraft*. After successfully clearing the dungeon, the group would continue to visit the dungeon every week for the loot gained after killing the monsters within. Certain "boss" monsters drop one or two random rare items when killed. This means that for all players in the raid to receive the items they desire, they must clear the dungeon over and over again. When a particular item drops—a more powerful sword, say—multiple players may want a chance at receiving the item. Many ways of dividing the loot have risen out of these game-mechanics

driven situations, but the loot system used by a particular group is often a testament to the general social and political structure of the group. In other words, the mechanics of raiding for scarce rewards set the stage for emergent loot rules based on the social realities of a particular raid group. Some raid groups, for example, use the common DKP system (Wikipedia, 2007) where players accrue points for weekly attendance and participating in killing certain monsters. When an item they want drops, players bid on it using the points they've accrued. This system reinforces an individualistic ideology, serving to emphasize competition among raid members and encouraging players to leave the group once they've received the items they desire. Another way of considering who should receive an item is to look at the overall benefit of the group, maximizing the effectiveness of the raid by allocating loot to whomever would make the raid most efficient. For example, the sword could be given to whoever would use it the most during the activities of the raid group thus making future endeavors take less time. This method of dividing the loot attempts to shorten the time it takes for *all* members of the raid group to receive what they desire and works under the assumption that those who receive items early-on stay in the group until everyone has benefited from membership. The social conditions needed for this assumption to exist indicate high trust among group members and supports findings that correlate trust with effective teamwork (Iacono & Weisband, 1997). This only exists, from what I've seen, when raid groups are composed of players with existing bonds and strong friendships (Chen, in review).

Viewing the division of loot as an individual-versus-group scenario helps us consider it as an example of what economic and political game theorists call a "social dilemma" (Hardin, 1968 and Axelrod, 1985) where individual incentives are in tension with group benefits. Loot division is only one example of the many kinds of social agreements and structures that a

successful team has to develop while playing *World of Warcraft*. The biggest problem I encountered when I attempted to use social dilemma models to look at player decisions was that the people I played with were not "rational" actors in the game-theory sense where decisions are based on incentives and rewards. Instead, they functioned as members of a historical group with dynamic socio-political relationships among group members (Galarneau & Chen, in press). These relationships played a tremendous impact on the players' shared understanding of group norms, and many players simply followed established norms rather than making informed individual choices. One of my goals is to explore different ways educators can help players make choices based on more explicit notions of how they are placed within their larger social setting.

#### Design: Ethnography of high-end raid groups

The goal of ethnography, according to Clifford Geertz, is to bridge the gap between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" ways of knowing (Geertz, 1975)—between a micro, lived experience and a macro, scholarly understanding. I follow the tradition of games ethnography from a participant's perspective (Steinkuehler, 2004 and Hayano, 1982). I play to play, and, like others who write about their lives (c.f., Jenkins, 2006), I attempt to describe what goes on in a particular domain of which I am closely affiliated. If I was not studying games, I would still be playing, and I identify myself as more a gamer than an academic as I have been playing computer games for most of my life. At times, in fact, I feel like I should be writing ethnography about academia to an audience of gamers.

#### *Settings, participants, and access*

As a gamer-researcher, I collected data on two different raid groups that I participated in. I played *World of Warcraft* for a year (November 2004 to October 2005) before joining the first

raid that was composed of players from an alliance of guilds. This group's progress in the 40-person dungeon Molten Core (MC) was the main focus of my study. We visited MC twice a week for about nine months (October 2005 to July 2006). With the same character, I also joined a smaller 20-person group whose members all belonged to my guild. This second group visited the dungeon known as Zul'Gurub (ZG) once a week also for about nine months, though it started about six months later (March 2006 to November 2006). I was able to join both of these raids when they first formed and was thus able to document the incremental learning that occurred over several months before each group was able to successfully clear their respective dungeons. Of note is that both of these groups were composed of members who explicitly stated that they valued friendship and shared activity as motivators for participating rather than the prospects of receiving valuable loot. I had access to the first group through my guild affiliation, and I helped form the second group, though I did not actively lead. Other than with a couple of friends who I had an existing off-screen relationship, I only knew these players through in-game and other online interactions. I presented myself as a fellow gamer who wanted to collect non-identifiable data that was generated by normal playing and through the online discussions players had about the game when not actually playing. In fact, I would say my role as a gamer outweighed my role as a researcher at times. I had a vested interest in these raids and therefore spoke up when I felt I could contribute at a micro, experience-near level.

### *Data collection*

I am focusing on the chat between the members of the two raid groups while they planned their evening's activities and during the activities themselves. I saved all the public in-game text chat (similar in form to text in online chat rooms) that I observed while playing from March 2006 to June 2006. During this period, the ZG group was first starting to go to the

dungeon and learn to work as a group, while the MC group was finally establishing a routine. I also video and audio recorded specific boss fights during this period if it was a boss who we had not yet successfully killed. This helped me look at the non-routine kinds of voice chat and in-game interactions that needed to occur in the heat of the moment when text chat was too cumbersome to use. *In all, I have 75 hours of raid specific text chat and about 15 hours of boss fight video to analyze. On top of this, I participated in online forums run by the two raid groups and archived the threads that were substantially about strategies, planning, loot rules, or group norms.* Of particular note are the chat logs and forum threads regarding moments of struggle and frustration within the two groups.

### *Data*

*World of Warcraft* has several default in-game text chat channels available to all players. There are also optional channels that most players in the raid group, including me, unsubscribed from because it was too daunting a task to keep track of that many channels and because the talk found on those channels was irrelevant to the raid. I made a methodological choice to collect less data that might have given more information about the general game world and, instead, focus on raid activities. It is possible that the lack of certain data limits the activity I could observe (e.g., a player may have made references to chat found on an optional channel making it difficult for me to understand the reference).

Any player can also define custom chat channels to share with other players. My Molten Core raid group, for example, used six custom channels, broken down by character class/role in the group to help each sub-group attend to their role-specific tasks. Each player subscribed to one of these channels depending on their character class. I subscribed to all of these channels so I could see the simultaneous coordination during our raid excursions. At times this made it



difficult for me to keep track of the chat I was supposed to follow as a player, but it let me see a bigger picture of the interwoven, simultaneous task-oriented chat that demonstrated the trust each sub-group had that the other sub-groups were on-task.

Each member of both raids was also expected to communicate via voice chat using a third-party voice over IP application. Most communication happened through text, however, and the audio was reserved for chat that needed immediate action.

### *Analysis*

I have several agendas I want to pursue as I analyze the data. First, I want to document how these two particular groups of players communicated and coordinated with each other to complete in-game tasks. Second, I aim to highlight moments of failure or frustration (Barron, 2003) and explain how the two groups overcame these moments through framing the issues a certain way to help or hinder argumentation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003) done by various members of the raids. An early analysis focusing on these topics contrasts routine practice from a well-performing session with the interactions during a poor-performing session (Chen, in review). For this earlier work, I only analyzed the text chat from two gaming sessions (about 10 hours of text chat). For the dissertation I will analyze the whole corpus of data I have available. In expanding my analysis, my third goal is to identify patterns of interactions among group members and see if these patterns can map onto different theories about how humans function within a larger system (e.g., Bogost, 2006, for unit operations; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, for activity theory; Latour, 2005, for actor-network theory; Stevens, 2000, and Strauss, 1985, for divisions of labor and situated cognition; and Hutchins, 1995, for distributed cognition). Finally, I want to pay close attention to the power dynamics between group members by making a critical read of how they communicate with one another and how particular group members use

language to construct or reinforce a social order (Goodwin, 2002). This will include frequency of interactions as well as initiation of talk and kinds of talk. For example, I have noticed that while women make up about 25% of our raids, it seemed like they only make up about 10% of the talk. I need to analyze and code the data to confirm or deny this sense.

### Contribution

I believe my study offers contributions to the virtual teams and online games literature as well as the literature on actors in social systems because my position within the gaming community allows me to give an ethnographic account of the everyday interactions of self-professed atypical groups attempting to complete the most exclusive content. Existing research (c.f., Yee, on-going) surveys the behaviors of online game players at large. My data shows the actual practice of the players and looks at relationships that they may not be aware of. Other ethnographic studies (c.f., Steinkuehler, 2004) describe the in-game practices of certain players, but they do not look specifically at the teamwork practices of high-end raids. This is an important setting to explore because players who are able to be part of raids show dedication and seriousness in completing common goals. The players are motivated to do "work" in a game, and my particular groups do it *for* the group dynamic rather than individual rewards. Yet the kinds of social structures used by the players to engage in this work may serve to reinforce certain inequitable socio-political dynamics. Understanding how and why this happens can help us design powerful learning and team experiences in "real work" settings. Furthermore, with 9 million active *World of Warcraft* subscribers and the popularity of social networking sites, the rise of gaming culture and online forms of interaction is undeniable. Without enough critical thought about online life, I fear many people who are marginalized in off-screen life will continue to feel oppressed online.

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