

Chapter 1.11

Socializing in an Online Gaming Community: Social Interaction in World of Warcraft

Vivian Hsueh Hua Chen

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Henry Been Lirn Duh

National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) allows a large number of players to cooperate, compete and interact meaningfully in the online environment. Gamers are able to form social network with fellow gamers and create a unique virtual community. Although research has discussed the importance of social interaction in MMOG, it fails to articulate how social interaction takes place in the game. The current chapter aims to depict how gamers interact and socialize with each other in a popular MMOG, *World of Warcraft*. Through virtual ethnography, specific interaction patterns and communication behaviors within the community are discussed. It is concluded that the types of social interaction

taken place in the gaming world is influenced by the temporal and spatial factors of the game as well as the game mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Digital games play an increasingly central role in the life of many adolescents and adults. Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) is a game genre that allows gamers to be immersed in a three dimension dynamic world. It has attracted many to try out – approximately 56% of American college students have played online games before (Pew Internet Project, 2003). Studies have argued that social interaction and relationship building are the key reasons why MMOG gain its popularity (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2003). Jakobsson & Taylor

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(2003) contend “social networks form a powerful component of the game play and the gaming experience, one that must be seriously considered to understand the nature of massively multiplayer online games” (p.81). Similarly, Ducheneaut & Moore, (2004a) noted how *gamers need to do much more than mindlessly accumulate XP: they also need to increase their social capital within the game’s society...they need not only learn the game commands, but they must also become socialized into the game community. To be recognized as a good player [one needs] to learn the lingo, perform [his/her] role well when grouped with others, and more generally demonstrate that [he/she is] an interesting person to play with (p. 2)*

Also, in an online survey, it was found that 39.4% of male respondents (n = 2971) and 53.3% of female respondents felt their MMOG friends were comparable or better than their real-life friends (Yee, 2006b).

The assumption of the importance of sociability in sustaining the interest of gamers has resulted in the development of MMOG designed to encourage social interactions. Game developers are trying to make MMOG more sociable by implementing game activities that promote social interaction within the game (Ducheneaut, Moore & Nickell, 2004). Yee (2006a) noted how “most MMOG are designed such that users must often collaborate to achieve goals within the environment” (p. 4) and “[m]ost forms of advancement in MMOG require increasing cooperation or dependency on other users, oftentimes mutually beneficial”. Often, the game design places players in “high stress crisis” scenarios which are also “trust-building scenarios” thus potentially facilitating relationship formations (Yee, 2006a, p. 16). In a study of the popular MMORPG, Star Wars Galaxies, Ducheneaut & Moore (2004b) showed how game designers of Star Wars Galaxies developed game features and game quests that “promote interactions among the players... [as] these encounters are essential to the success of ... virtual worlds” (p.1). Social interaction is also found as a key factor that makes

gamers become engaged in the game and play the game continuously (Chen, Duh & Phuah, 2006).

Designers of MMOGS thus place great emphasis on sociability, and implement features to encourage social interactions and collaboration among gamers (Ducheneaut et al, 2004). However, past studies did not provide clear explanation of exactly what social interaction is within the game. They also fail to address how in-game factors affect social interaction. This chapter narrates social interaction within the game World of Warcraft (WoW). It also provides explanation of what and how different factors affecting social interaction.

BACKGROUND

Previous research on social interactions in MMORPGs attempted to use various different measures to study social interactions. Quantitatively, social interactions in MMORPGs have been studied by several authors in various manners. Ducheneaut & Moore (2004b) provided quantitative data on the social interactions of Star Wars Galaxies players by collecting data on “who is interacting with whom”; “in what way (gesture or chat)”; where (starport or cantina), at what date and time, and what the content of the interaction was (text chat or “social” command). It was found that the ten most popular social gestures were: Smile, cheer, clap, wave wink, grin, nod, bow, thank, greet (p. 4). They also found that on average, “a player goes into the cantina, makes about one gesture towards another player, exchanges four sentences with him or her, and receives one gesture in return” (p. 4). Ducheneaut & Moore (2004b) noted some shortcomings in the way they have analyzed social interaction. For example, data collected was purely from publicly observable behavior in the general chat and does not analyze private messages players send to one another and within their player groups and guilds. Moreover, part of the social interaction measured originated from spammers who use a macro to constantly repeat

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