Net Surfers Do Ride Alone

A pre-limitary study on socializing in World of Warcraft: why we play with those we do.

Introduction

In recent years Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have received great attention, especially after the launch of Blizzard's World of Warcraft (WoW) which helped elevating games and specifically the MMOGs to become more mainstream, by offering a very polished product, even in its early beta stages, that also catered to the casual player, who wasn't necessarily an expert in playing online games. WoW caters to various groups of people, including the casual players, the hardcore players, the role-players, those that enjoy Player versus Player combat and those that prefer Player versus Environment (scripted content). This diversity ensures that a lot of people can find something to do in the game world, but just like Jakobsson & Taylor (2003) argues regarding Everquest, then WoW (which is similar to Everquest in its social structures) is also best experienced while in the company of others, mixing play and socializing.

The basis for this study was my own experiences in WoW, which initially sparked the thoughts regarding who we play with (and maybe more importantly, who we don't). I have played WoW on and off in various social environments, including casual and hardcore ranging between zero to thirty hours a week, for about four years, primarily on the United States servers. But after transferring to the European servers[1], I experienced an event which I had never encountered on the United States servers, where the shared language of choice is English; someone was unwilling to invite me to their group due to the fact that I was unable to speak their native tongue, even though a lot of the more menial tasks and challenges can be overcome with little to no or simple communication. But I couldn't get angry at being turned down, for pondering further upon the experience I can say that most players I know, and even myself, aren't that much different. We play with some people over others, all for various reasons. And it is these reasons I find interesting and worth exploring further.

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[1] The servers in online games are usually divided according to regions, to keep players playing with those of a similar language and culture. In WoW the various servers are spread across the US, Europe, Korea and China, with the game worlds contained on the servers spanning over several languages. See http://www.wowwiki.com/Realms_list for the different servers and their realms.

My theory is that "the majority of players in WoW play with those they do due to selfish reasons". In this study I will delve into my theory and explore the various reasons why we play with those we do, be it obtaining our own goals, gaining social capital or something else, and also why we chose not to play with others.

Methodology

I've chosen Aarseth's methodology regarding game analysis as a base for my own. Aarseth (2003) argues that to acquire knowledge about a game, the best ways to do so is by playing and reinforcing the play with study of the design and rules as well as observing or reading other's experiences. At the same time he also stresses the importance of balancing free play, analytical play and non-play, to get the best results. Furthermore I've decided to rely on Bartle's taxonomy regarding online players (1996), as it will help to sort the players into sensible categories to give a better picture regarding why they play with those they do.

To explore my theory I'm drawing on my own experiences with WoW, both as a lone player as well as that of a member of a guild, as well as drawing on the experience of others through the literature. Beyond literature, data for this study has been gathered in two ways: observations of players' interactions in the game world as well as several batches of interviews with different players, both formal and informal. The observations have been performed disguised directly in different settings in the game, all natural, including two different guilds, public channels[2] and private channels[3], while the interviewees have been selected based on availability from a guild consisting primarily of Americans. I believe that while interviews can produce good results, it should be coupled with observation, since people are prone to say one thing while doing another. Performing the interviews over more than one session also enables eventual problems to be averted for the remaining interviews. Due to privacy concerns regarding why the interviewees play with some people over others, I've chosen to mask the subject names while informing the participants.

The choice of field site, an American guild located on a United States server, was based primarily due to prior experience with the region as well as convenience as I had friends and acquaintances in the guild, offering an easy road to come into contact with the participants. I didn't have much prior experience playing on a European multi-cultural server, and as Taylor (2006a) notes then the choice of field site does matter. Beyond the surprising encounter with the different nationalities, then I also experienced the language[4]

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[2] Public channels include zone-wide communication, for example Trade and LookingForGroup.
[3] Private channels include limited communication, for example Party and Raid, as well as Guild.
[4] One example is the act of getting a high level character, which vastly out-levels the challenge, to assist a lower level character through it. On the European servers it is commonly referred to as "boosting", where in the United States it doesn't have a specific equivalent.

as well as some conventions in the gameplay to be slightly different and thus found the United States server to be the better choice instead of exploring all new grounds.

It should be noted that while this study is done in WoW, any MMORPG could have been chosen, and the results here could be applied to another game of the same type and vice-versa, for example Everquest or Lord of the Rings Online, with social structures similar to WoW.

Literature Review

The majority of works I've chosen to draw upon is within the area of online communities and player culture and serves to help form a better basis for my own research and the understanding of why we play with those we do. Not all works are covered in this literature review, as I've only chosen to cover the most central here.

Jakobsson & Taylor (2003) explores social interaction in the game Everquest and finds that there are striking similarities in the social structures between Everquest and the Mafia. This work has several findings that are of relevance to my study. They argue that social networks are a powerful aspect of the gameplay and that reputation and social capital is of great importance. They find that "*Who you know and your position within the larger social world if a central part of EQ gaming life*", which I believe is one of the possible factors for player to play with specific others, the forming of social capital, which helps the player progress faster (and in some cases it's impossible without) in the game. They also cover the subject of guilds, naming two distinctly different kinds, the social- and the raiding guild. These two represent different play styles, something which is also covered by Bartle (1996), which in turn also presents different motives for playing with others. As part of the conclusion they comment on the importance of the participants when researching MUDs and MMORPGs as well as the fact that these online relations and experiences are as real as the offline ones, something that is also noted upon by Wellman & Gulia (1999).

Bartle (1996) explores different types of players who play MUDs, the predecessor to the MMORPGs, and proposes a taxonomy that defines four different player types: the achiever, the explorer, the socializer and the killer. These types have different preferences in regards to gameplay, for example a social focus versus a gameplay focus and different ways of interacting and viewing other players, although he makes sure to emphasize that it is based on stereotypical players and there will be variations. Just like variations exist in Bartle's taxonomy then they will also be found in my own study, which makes it impossible to say conclusively that all players for example are selfish. A better approach is to use the taxonomy and divide the players into segments allowing better results, as the game means something different to the various players,

giving them different motives for playing. As Bartle concludes, then MUDs are both games, pastimes, sports and entertainment, but not necessarily at the same time, it all depends on the player.

Wellman & Gulia (1999) asks the question if people can find community online and touches on the subject of the strength of purely online relationships. First they bring up comments made by Net enthusiasts and critics that summed up basically takes the stance of social interaction versus social isolation. Due to the low number of ethnographic studies of virtual communities (at the time of writing in 1999), they take it upon themselves to ask seven different questions that they answer based on other's research as well as they own experiences and anecdotes. All the while they express that their work is one of exploration into virtual communities and not one that seeks to answer the questions that comes up, as they find that it raises more questions for each you ask. The subtitle gives away their stance on the subject, that virtual or online communities aren't something that should be viewed as social isolation, as Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone. I believe this piece is important due to its coverage of various aspects of online communities, as well as standing in stark contrast to my own theory, that players while benefitting from their online interactions mainly play for the sake of themselves.

Myers (2007), much like myself, argue that human play is fundamentally selfish. Engaged in the MMORPG City of Heroes, he mainly looks at the Player versus Player (PvP, oppositional play) aspect of the game, but also comments on Player versus Environment (PvE, cooperative play) as he explores human play behavior. During my research I'd focused mainly on the PvE aspect, while his work brings some interesting observations regarding PvP that can be related to. He argues that social play within MMORPGs tends to reduce the diversity of individual play and aptly compares players of online games to users of social services like MySpace or FaceBook[5]. He finds that players assign values to characters based on various factors, for example in-game relationships and consequences of interactive play, which results in (pseudo-)social hierarchies, something I've also experienced, for example in the form of player-cliques or preferred playing partners He concludes that to form a better theory surrounding play, it is needed to focus more on the role of individual play, which contradicts a fair amount of articles covering sociality and communities.

Burn and Carr (2006) covers the subject of motivation and online gaming. They propose three categories of motivations: Representational, Ludic and Communal. Representational relates to the player avatar and how this serves as the player's actor in the world, both as a representation of the player but also as its own character, which isn't something I've covered in my study beyond the possibility of discrimination or favoritism due to in-game avatar traits. Ludic covers those aspects that promote the function of the avatar as a

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[5] http://www.myspace.com/ and http://www.facebook.com/

game component, for example strategizing or gaining experience. This is one of the important aspects for competitive players and stands at the side of social capital as one of my theory's main motivations. Communal covers the social aspect, such as teaming up and interacting with other people, although they've chosen also to include other facets such as relationship to other games and expectations to the game. Finally they conclude that these motivations aren't mutually exclusive and can be present at the same time. I've found that it's not uncommon for players to experience all multiple of these at the same time, although in some cases the motivations are being downplayed in favor of those with a stronger drive.

Preliminary analysis and findings

After my initial surveys into the literature as well as observations and the first batch of interviews, I've encountered some relevant findings that both show interesting aspect of player motivations as well as form a base for further exploration, particularly in regards to the interviews. Bartle's taxonomy defines four different player types, which I'll cover below.

	Acting (on)		
Players	Killers	Achievers	World
	Socializers	Explorers	
	Interacting (with)		
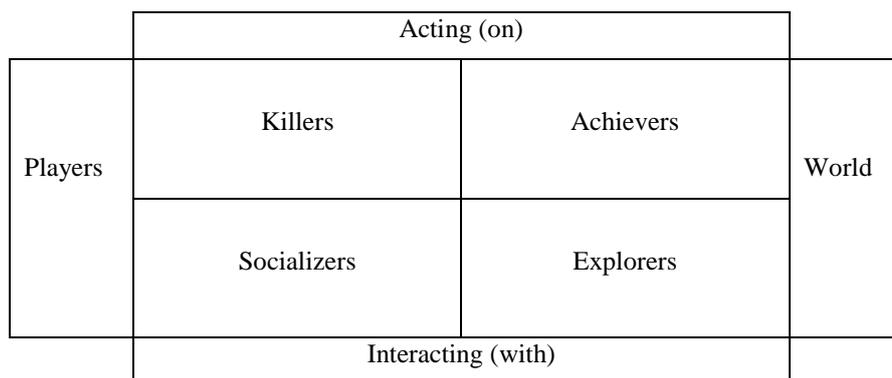
The Killer focuses on acting on other players, usually by killing or otherwise annoying them, and isn't too concerned about reputation. But in tact with the games becoming more and more based on group play to progress to the more powerful tiers of play, it has necessitated that players, although not necessarily wanting to play in a group, try to keep on a good footing with the community at large and preserve their reputation, which is of great importance (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). During my own observations I encountered a scenario where a player had lead several successful raids[6] with a mixture of people from different guilds and had started prioritizing himself over others when it came to distributing rewards. He ended up leaving the server due to his ruined reputation, although he later came back under a different character name.

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[6] WoW has 2 different sizes of groups: a party which consists of 2-5 people and a raid which consists of 6-40 people, with raids being typically used in higher tiers of play with more powerful rewards.

Another scenario was during a fishing competition, where a player outside the competition attempted to assist his friend by impeding one of the contestants.

Achievers are those that are more interested in the game-like aspects of the game, and focus on getting ahead and winning the game. Achievers could also be referred to as power gamers (as mentioned by Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003), players that are more knowledgeable and spend more time on the game, be it reading the latest news or running around fighting monsters. One phrase I've encountered many a time, although it's usually said in jest, which does carry some degree of truth, is that *"WoW is serious business"*. When trying to get ahead of others it's important for all participants to give 110%. In some cases players get the ultimatum to shape up or get out. But just as mentioned above, the social connections are of great importance, even more so for achievers that without them wouldn't be able to get ahead as easily in the game. Even so, those relations that are of no immediate visible benefit to the player tend to be downplayed. Multiple achievers I've interviewed commented that they *"were unlikely to assist someone they didn't know unless it was of almost no inconvenience"*. The gathered data also points in the direction of Achievers being something that many players evolve into, or wishes to become as some of the other areas get depleted or less interesting after repeated interaction. One player displayed a great love for roleplaying and exploration, while after a time he started becoming interested in a more progressive approach to the gameplay. Similarly another player, while not an achiever (neither by his normal actions nor his own claims), got so annoyed over people's performance at playing during a raid, that he threatened to beat up an off-line acquaintance of his who was playing with him.

Socializers and Explorers are all about interacting, be it with other players or with the world thorough exploring. They see the game as being a pastime or entertainment. Socializers are much more likely to offer assistance to strangers and as such generally get more connections than achievers, although these connections are typically weaker in the form of game knowledge. This was one area I ended up lacking data in was the one dealing with the more casual players, as my research has been more focused on those with an interest in acting on the game world. This has been remedied for future interviews and will be covered at a later point.

A focus on Interacting in the game, or the communal motivation (Burr and Carr, 2006), serves to make people more inclined to assist other without any greater goal beyond being entertained and having fun. The more focus put on acting on the world, or the ludic motivation (Burr and Carr, 2006), the more people are inclined to be selfish and only act if it serves themselves somehow. It's not possible to make a sweeping generalization that all players are selfish, but instead that some segments are. Wellman & Gulia (1999) con-

cludes that virtual communities aren't social isolation but instead opens up to whole new opportunities. Their conclusion holds true, but in the case of the selfish segments then they play with other for the benefit of themselves. So in a way then some Net surfers do ride alone.

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