From tree house to barracks: The social life of guilds in World of Warcraft

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In 1999, 8% of all Americans (not adolescents) said they played games online. By 2003 that number had risen to 37%[1], and it continues to climb (Fallows, 2004). These numbers would be less noteworthy if players were going on to networks to play alone, but they are increasingly playing with others. It follows that in an online networked world, games matter socially (Williams, 2006b). Yet despite public curiosity, intense play patterns and press interest, there is surprisingly little empirical research on the social dynamics of game players. When "games" are reduced further by platform or genre, there is less still. In the current work, we focus on the massively multiplayer online (MMO) game "World of Warcraft," (WoW) the most popular such game in North America.

Our research is concerned with the social dynamics of players within the in-game organizations known as player "guilds." By focusing on player behavior, attitudes and opinions, we explore the meanings they make, the social capital they derive and the networks they form. And, with the use of a representative sample and in-depth interviews, we explore these areas with both breadth and depth.

Social Capital and Online Games

The project's theory derives from political science, organizational communication and sociology, with the added complication of being undertaken in a virtual space influenced by artificial computer code. In a narrow sense, the questions here involve the forms that these networks take: emergent or formal (Monge & Contractor, 2001). But in the broadest sense, the questions herein deal with civic life in North America. Putnam's

1 These data were graciously supplied to the author by Senior Research Scientist John Horrigan of the Pew Internet and American Life Project in an email.

work on modern social capital (Putnam, 2000) has made the case that media have been steadily displacing and degrading civic life in the United States over the past 50 years. In brief, the argument is that relatively passive and asocial media have become an increasingly important part of the lives of individuals, family members, co-workers and community members. Time spent with these media, chiefly television, may have been taking time away from the vital tasks and processes that engender vibrant communities, families and neighborhoods. Crucial "third places" for civic interaction have been on the decline as well, as families have moved away from dense urban communities and into relatively atomized, isolated suburbs where neighbors rarely see each other or mingle (Oldenburg, 1997). The question at hand is whether newer, more interactive and possibly more social media might be impacting those trends, either positively or negatively. This could happen either through bridging social capital—the loose connections between relative strangers that lead to diverse networks and information streams—or bonding social capital, which is traditional social, emotional and substantive support (Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006a).

We focus on the most popular MMO in North America precisely because it appears, on its face, to be an engaging and highly social space to which literally millions of players have flocked (Blizzard.com). Previous research on one asocial title showed a largely negative effect on civic life (Williams, 2006, in press). MMOs are of course merely one of several online "places" in which social interaction might occur, but they are unique in the fact that they collect and mix people pursuing goals in three-dimensional space. This makes them arguably more "place"-like than a standard text-based chat room. The questions and results presented here suggest that WoW is in fact a

vibrant third place, populated with a range of social experiences ranging from the ephemeral impersonal groups to sustained and deep relationships that extend offline.

But are MMOs truly like real-world spaces? Any "place" is governed to some extent by its architecture. In a bar, for example, there are tables and chairs and the bar itself, the position of which have social implications. Some groups face each other, some groups stand and might mingle and some face the bartender rather than each other. Mere location can govern interactions. Additionally, there are rules governing those interactions, both legal and social. For example, bar patrons must be a certain age and adhere to a loose set of social norms. However, there are several key differences between MMO space and a local bar, park or even Habermassian coffeehouse (Habermas, 1998). As Lessig (1999) points out, the key difference is that the architectures and rules in virtual space are anything but organic. The placement of walls, the ability to walk or fly, and anything else constraining or enabling behavior is a result of written code. Some of that code was written precisely to enable and restrict behaviors, while some of it enables and restricts in unplanned ways. Similarly, there are social rules and the equivalent of laws that govern and impact behaviors in MMO space.

Every game features "mechanics," which can be broadly thought of as the incentives of game play. For example, a simple game mechanic such as "capture the flag" is laden with social consequences. It implies two adversarial teams, the desire to guard a resource and the desire to steal one. This automatically pits groups against one another and will impact those groups' social behaviors. Some groups may find, for example, that with repeated play they like to specialize roles or to play with people whose actions they can predict and depend on. The key point, buttressed in almost all of our findings, is that

game mechanics and social architectures have an immense impact on the resulting social formations and interactions within these spaces. They govern how large groups are (or seek to be), their incentives to remain together, and the roles necessary for group success. The overarching conclusion here is that the very real, very personal social impacts of MMO space are equally a result of the individuals and personalities involved and the coded, artificial social architectures of the game world. This is not to say that all behavior is controlled from above in a machine-like fashion; far from it, WoW players exhibit a wide range of emergent, original and downright rebellious behaviors ranging from the creation of their own computer codes to in-world protests. However, the structure and rule set of the game world have a clear impact on what kinds of people play, what they do, and how and why they interact with one another.

Research Questions

We began our investigations with a simple question: what kinds of social organizations do players create in MMOs such as WOW? Indeed, while these games encourage the formation of persistent player associations by design (Taylor, 2003b), little is known about the size, structure, and formal practices of these "player guilds." Past research in organizational behavior (Mintzberg, 1978) shows that social groups, like work groups (Miles & Snow, 1995), can be organized in very diverse ways, based on a combination of their members' objectives and the group's environment. The organization of the group, in turn, will affect its current and future members' social experience. We therefore decided to establish a basic typology of guilds, much like Mintzberg's typology of organizations. Variables of particular interest to us were the group's size, its official and unofficial objectives, its formal practices (or lack thereof), and the eventual impact of

these variables on the group's survival and the enjoyment of its members. Such a typology would then allow us to explore the complex interplay between the game's dynamics and its players' aspirations. Of particular interest were the size and management practices of guilds. Did the game's mechanics encourage particular sizes and was there a managerial challenge (Chandler, 2000) or even a social unwieldiness at particular size cut-points (Dunbar, 1998)?

While describing the various guild types available in WoW provides us with essential background information, it is not enough in itself to understand the effects of this particular medium on social capital: from an understanding of groups, we must turn to an individual's experience within them. This led us to our second question: what kinds of roles and social relationships do players develop within guilds and what were the social consequences? Did bridging or bonding social capital go up or down as a result of membership? We were particularly interested in the frequency and length of contacts between players (in other words, their social network centrality and the strength of their ties), how much social support they found in guilds, and how invested players were in the life of their online community. This would allow us to assess how social the game is overall, how different guild types affect social dynamics, and the relationship between online relationships and their offline counterparts.

A third set of questions involved the medium itself. To what extend does the WoW social interface impact the social interactions? Previous research on communication modalities suggests that richer media lead to stronger connections and possibly more social capital overall (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1992), while other strands of research suggest that the intent of the users can supersede any

channel effects, i.e. users adapt communications media quickly to manage their social connections (Walther, 1996; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005).

Method

Video game research has been plagued with the same quantitative/qualitative methods divide that has stymied progress in other fields. Additionally, MMO space represents a special challenge to academic researchers seeking original empirical data because it must often be conducted remotely and anonymously (Wood, Griffiths, & Eatough, 2004). Yet the same advantages and disadvantages of the various methods still apply. Ethnographic research has the benefit of understanding true depth and context—something never fully captured by survey or experimental methods. Yet those same survey and experimental methods often have the benefit of collecting a representative sample. Their conclusions—however deep or shallow they may be—do at least generalize to some larger population, whereas the in-depth ethnographic approach cannot tell the reader if the phenomena uncovered are common or extremely rare. But as Williams (2005) has noted, there are several ways for the two approaches might be combined in a synergistic fashion. Accordingly, our method sought to cut that Gordian knot by taking the advantage of ethnographic work (depth) and combining it with the advantages of most survey-based work (breadth and representativeness). There were three distinct steps.

Step one was for the research team to engage in the game world as participant observers. Researchers of games should play the games they are studying (Williams & Skoric, 2005). If they do not, they cannot know what questions to ask, decipher the local

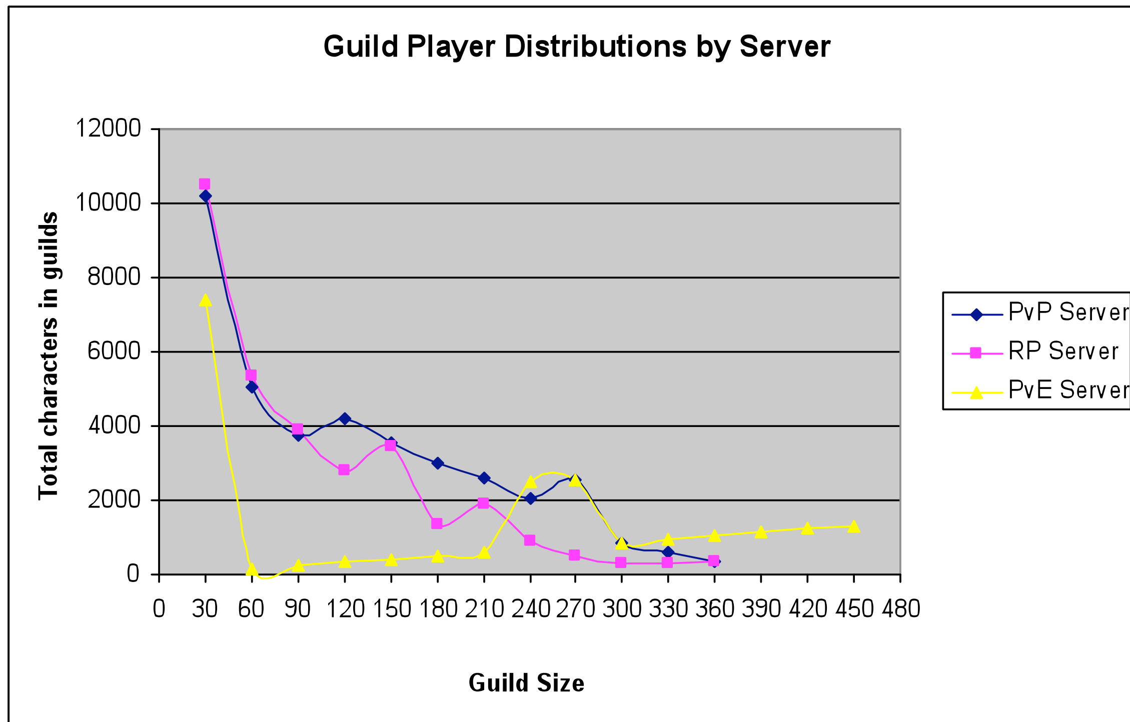
language, understand the game mechanics or have any sense of the social context of play. Thus each member of the research team played WoW and attempted to join guilds. This time played ranged from relatively short (15 hours) to very long (1351 hours) over a 16-month period. One team member joined a small, medium, and large guild, each for at least three months.

Step two was to survey the population and create a sampling frame, starting with an understanding of different player and server types. Players differ in their group centrality, the size of their guild, the type of server on which they play and the faction they belong to (Horde or Alliance). Our measure of centrality refers to how often the character grouped with others in their guild, and was derived through social network analysis mapping. Those who grouped more often were thought to be more "central" or social hub-like members of their guild—an assumption that did not entirely bear out in the analysis, but one that remained useful for stratifying a sample by type of behavior nonetheless. WoW operates three primary server types: Player vs. Player (PvP), Player vs. Environment (PvE) and Role Playing (RP). Thus a truly representative sample of WoW guild members must have a measure for every character for each of these dimensions, and an equal proportion of them in the final sample.

To collect these data, "bots" or automated characters were systematically logged in to three servers (one for each server type) to collect data on measurable player behavior around the clock. This allowed an ongoing census of what characters existed, when they were online, how often, what guild they belonged to and when they were grouped with others (for more information on data collection procedures see Ducheneaut et al, this issue). The census data were collected over a month-long period in January,

2006. Because the topic of this paper is guild dynamics, we are restraining our results to players who were part of guilds. This represented slightly more than half of the population.[2] The breakdown of guild player distribution is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1.



Slight differences aside, there is a broad pattern across servers: There are a large number of small guilds, a steady decline in the number of moderate-sized guilds, a slight increase in large guilds and then a steady tail off in the very largest guilds. We thus created equivalent cut-points for guilds which we labeled "small" (1 to 10 members), "medium" (11 to 35 members), "large" (36 to 150 members) and "huge" (more than 150 members).

These several criteria allowed us to create a stratified sampling frame in which we could collect an equal number of players from each faction, each guild size, high- and

[2] The percentages of characters who belonged to guilds varied slightly across the three server types. It was 56.0% for PvE, 53.0% for PvP and 49.2% for RP.

low guild centrality, and from each server type. After an initial period of practice interviews, the team determined that the best response rates came in the early evening hours. This practice phase also lead us to reduce the sampling frame to exclude characters who did not meet a minimum threshold of time online, or a minimum character level of five (by the end of the one-month sampling frame). This yielded a final sampling frame which was representative of all WoW characters in guilds across all servers, faction types and degrees of centrality.

Step three was to move from methodological breadth and representativeness and into depth and context. This step consisted of guided ethnographic interviews by two trained members of the research team. 48 interviews were conducted over a six-week period over February and March, 2006. Prospective participants were randomly selected from the sampling frame categories and were checked to see if they were online. Across all characters sampled, 2.5% were online at any one time. If online, the player was then asked to participate in research about their experiences in WoW and their general opinions. There was no cover story or incentive offered, and nearly every player invited was busy doing something engaging (or likely would not have been logged on). Nevertheless, the response rate was 24.5%, which compares favorably to national-level telephone-based research. Each interview began with 13 base questions that addressed the core research questions above, but allowed for the interviewers to actively listen for and engage in any potentially interesting testimony that would go “off script.” The interviews were conducted within WoW using direct text chat, and in one case via IRC chat. Each was then pasted into standard word processing programs. The average time of each interview was one hour and 39 minutes.

Blizzard Entertainment, the maker of WoW, declined to assist our research project, which left us with one major confound: We were not able to separate real-life players from the multiple characters they played. Thus the characters in our sample were certainly each only some percentage of the total time online for any one player. To retain as much sampling strength as possible, we interviewed players only after confirming that this was their "main" character rather than a secondary or "alt" character. A "main" character was defined as the one played most often, or, if the player played several characters and each for large amounts of time, it was the one played most recently.

Results

While each research question was examined, there were a number of unexpected patterns and phenomena revealed in the interview data. The results are therefore grouped broadly by the categories "group-level" results and "individual-level" results. Direct quotations from the players are included and noted as either representative or illustrative of particular points. Spelling and grammar were corrected when necessary to make the substance of the quotation clear.

Group-level patterns

A typology of guilds

The basic guild types differ by goals, size and membership. The basic types by goal are social, PvP, raid and role-play.

Roughly 60% of interviewees said they belonged to a social guild. A purely social guild would be one in which the game's goals are truly secondary to the social

interactions that occur while pursuing those goals. In many of these, particularly the smaller ones, the social interactions were extensions of real-world social bonds. There were several cases in the sample of real-world collections of friends or families playing together as a guild of their own, or as a family unit within a moderately sized guild. Yet even when a guild member labeled their group as something else, the word “social” was nearly omnipresent. Guilds that others described as exclusive “raid” guilds were usually described as “social” from within. In nearly every social guild that lasted more than a month, members and leaders were aware of the need for a certain level of maturity, responsibility and player welfare. This level of what can only be described as caring is remarkable given that the game is centered ostensibly around functional, not psychological or social goals. It is clear that social guilds go well past the game’s goals in creating and maintaining communities.

A PvP guild would be one in which the primary goal is battle with the other faction, chiefly within marked battleground areas. In these guilds, players organize both ad hoc and scheduled PvP teams much like a group of friends heading to the park to play some team sport; the opponents may or may not be known, but the increase in both fun and success is notable when the friends know each other’s roles and play styles. Status and ranking on public boards are primary goals of the members (Taylor, 2003a). Surprisingly, no guild members considered theirs to be a dedicated “PvP” guild. It was more likely that PvP subgroups formed within larger guilds and coexisted with others focused on other goals.

A raiding guild is in many senses the most glamorous within WoW. Roughly 35% of our sample fit this category. The primary function of a raiding guild is to organize and

schedule 40-member team events which typically last between two and eight hours, and require a heavy dose of management and intricate coordination of player roles. A raid is the most complex team-based task within MMOs and requires a certain amount of individual discipline and teamwork. To perform well, each player must act in the best interests of the group, requiring a high degree of familiarity and practice.

Lastly, role-play guilds work on a meta-level to all three of these others in that their main purpose is to allow members to pretend to truly "be" their characters. Thus, whether their goal is to PvP, socialize or raid, players are expected to be "in character," rather than be a real-world person who is obviously not, for example, an undead mage. More often than not, role play guilds were focused on creating helpful relationships (see below).

Often these types overlap in any one guild, with most considering themselves a hybrid of at least two. Most players were keenly aware of the types of guilds and had ready, common labels for them (which we have used here, not created). For example, one player stated "we're a raid-oriented family friendly guild." The ability to join a variety of different guild types should be seen as a strength of the game in some respects; players were usually able to find one that suited their social style and play goals. Yet for about 20% of respondents, the guild type did not match their preferences. In about half of the cases this was the player's inability to join a guild that fit their preferences, and in another half if was ignorance of the existence of those guilds.

It is notable that people join, or in some cases, create guilds for their pragmatic or social needs. In some cases this is an issue of personal style; the player wanted to play with others of similar personality, real-life demographics or even sense of humor. Yet the

most common reason to seek a particular guild type out was to accomplish game goals. This is a powerful case of the game mechanic influencing social decisions with unintended consequences. This pattern nearly always involved players of small guilds seeking to join a "raiding" guild. Without membership in one of these large (and often exclusive) groups, a player cannot have access to the game's most challenging content and most rewarding "loot." Many players at adequate levels normally join large guilds to have access to high end content, namely high-caliber equipment, weapons and exciting monsters. Smaller guilds cannot field enough players to gain access to this content.

Size matters

The sizes are interwoven with these goals and can be thought of as designer[3], small, medium and large. As a generality, smaller guilds tend to be more focused on social bonds while larger guilds focused more on game goals. This is not a hard rule, though. Small guilds still competed avidly toward game goals and several very large guilds featured very strong player relationships. These were more likely to become subgroups as the guild size increased, often because players in larger guilds became more focused on play goals, and because it became impractical for them to know well or care about each member of a large group. This is of course not unique to virtual space, and appears to follow the same patterns found in offline social groups (Dunbar, 1998). As guild size increased, guilds were also more likely to engage in more formal management and organizational practices. The largest guilds were more likely to maintain an external

[3] All guilded players have their guild's name below their own. A little more than 20% of guilds have only one member. Thus, a very small percentage of the WoW population has the equivalent of a personalized license plate, but is not actually a member of a group at all.

message board, website, or signup system and to use a phone-like voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) system while playing.

Small guilds (fewer than 10 members) represent the strongest bonding social capital found within WoW. Indeed, most small guilds represent strong real-world bonds that have extended into WoW rather than formed there. Roughly 75% of small guilds featured some founding unit of real-life friends of family. In these groups, previously unknown people were also more likely to extend their relationships outside of WoW by talking on the telephone or via VoIP. There were a handful cases of these relative strangers traveling to meet each other in person and even organizing family vacations together. These small groups were also the most likely to have migrated en masse from some previous game. In these cases, the game functioned as a way to maintain real-world bonds, often within families, but also between families and among co-workers. Egalitarian organization and a dislike of military-style hierarchy, often reinforced through humor and sarcasm, were mainstays of the successful small guilds. As one member put it “rank doesn't seem to be a barrier...we are more a big group of friends in a clubhouse setting.” The most successful small guilds recruited carefully and were selective with the personalities they admitted to their group even as they viewed large raid-oriented guilds as cold and exclusive.

Medium-sized guilds show the progression from the small, tightly knit groups to the large, sometimes less personal ones. In this range, members still place an emphasis on social bonds and families—indeed one simply seemed to be exactly like the small guilds, but with four real-world extended families as the core group. But with more members, there is a higher chance of a conflict in styles or ethics. This size range did have instances

of players being kicked out for violating guild ethics such as racist speech. Also in the medium range is the first appearance of a conflict of goals. Some members in this range care less about social support and are using their membership as a resource until they can achieve their true goals elsewhere: “I’m basically in it ‘till a higher lvl. Then I will move on to better things.”

The real change in guild life occurs with the move to large and huge guilds, which are very similar in their structures and organization. There is slightly less sociability in huge guilds, but as noted earlier, even these groups consider themselves social, selective and supportive. What is different in the larger guilds is the sudden need for formal organization, both for political and practical purposes. The use of voice also becomes common and expected. Groups with more than 35 members suddenly exhibit the need for leadership, although that function is not always performed well. Rules, probationary periods and attendance policies become more common, as do formal signups for activities. An apt analogy is that this level of guild is more like a team within a recreational sports league than a small group of friends who play casually. As one player noted and Putnam would surely appreciate, “its kind of like a bowling team or a softball league . . . it’s just as social even in here, probably more often then bowling since i talk to these people several nights a week.”

Faction differences

It is not clear if playing a certain faction has an impact on guild life or individual behavior, or if particular kinds of people self-select a certain faction to reinforce something about themselves. With an equal number of interviews of both Horde and Alliance we found few systematic differences at all. Two minor possibilities were core

members and PvP preference. Of the eight interviewees who weren't officers in their guilds yet thought of themselves as "core members," seven were Horde and only one was Alliance. That could alternatively mean that Horde guilds are generally more inclusive and egalitarian or that Horde players are more mistaken about their importance within their guild. Similarly, six Horde players viewed their guild as having a significant PvP ethic, while only two Alliance players did. These differences are too small to be seen as statistically significant are so are merely suggestions for future investigation. The primary conclusion is that the two factions have almost no systematic differences in their social dynamics.

Formal practices

The most common formal practices within guilds were the use of mission statements, recruitment and expulsion policies and external web sites. As noted above, these became more likely as guild size increased. Some guilds—even large ones—relied on relatively haphazard policies and procedures, but these were more likely to contain social tensions, misunderstandings and fights. Those guilds with clear policies and procedures managed tasks better and had generally happier members.

As Barnard (1938) famously put it, "An organization is born when there are individuals who are able to communicate, and who are determined to engage in actions oriented towards a *common goal.*" Game guilds are no exception. Mission statements were nearly always understood to exist on at least an informal basis (e.g. "just to help each other"), but were only codified in about 50% of guilds. A typical formal statement was "[The guild was] formed by a group of like-minded players, who became friends

through the game. Our main mission is to explore end game content with fair loot rules and a true need before greed philosophy."

Recruitment policies involved one of two methods: an impersonal call for members or a personal referral. This latter category included both referrals of people known only through WoW and a large number of real-life friends and family. Many referrals occurred after some sort of vetting process, i.e. a good group experience with the player, or more formally, some probationary membership period. Again, the more raid-oriented and larger the guild, the more likely these practices were. One somewhat surprising finding was the extent to which women were involved in guild recruiting. Female guild leaders were especially active recruiters and rank-and-file female members were more likely than their male counterparts to bring in new members, whether online or from off. Female members recruited boyfriends, spouses and family at a higher rate than men. Alternatively, it could be that men recruited those groups just as often but mentioned it less.

Guild removal was relatively rare. Most people leaving a guild did so because they had few strong ties and simply left the game or left for another guild. Occasionally, problematic members were removed by a guild leader or officer. In each case, these were tied to instances described by players as unnecessary social "drama," incivility or periods of inactivity. These cases were sometimes thought to be related to real-life personal issues such as drug use.

One last notable formal practice was the use of VoIP systems, which roughly 60% of guild members used in some way. VoIP is not built into the game itself, so its use requires the recognition that it might improve game play or sociability by players and the

ability to install the correct software and coordinate the lease of a commercial voice server. Guilds facilitated this practice, especially as they increased in size. Only one of the larger guilds in our sample did not systematically use a voice program. Nearly every user recognized it as an aid in coordinating large groups and in forming strategy in fluid situations. Perhaps half of the players using voice also identified it as a way to make the connections between players more personal, although not every player wanted this. Some chose to moderate their level of personal exposure by listening, but never talking. A fairly common reason given was "I have no mic," when it was clear that the player was far more concerned with being heard than with the difficulty of obtaining a microphone.

Guild churn

While the purpose of guilds is to transcend the ephemeral nature of pick-up groups and questing parties, their longevity remains very much an issue. From earlier research (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006), we know that about 21% of the guilds present on a WoW server at any given time disappear after a month. This high level of "churn" highlights the difficulties inherent in managing these entertainment communities: guilds appear to be fragile institutions.

Our interviews confirmed this fragility. For the vast majority of respondents, the guild they belonged to when we spoke with them was not their first guild. A lack of alignment between the player's individual objectives and the guild's objectives was often cited as an important reason for leaving a guild. As noted above, some merely used guilds as stepping stones and left, typically when the guild did not allow them to join the end-game raids. Other common sources of dissatisfaction were elitism, social distance, poor

leadership, a lack of players at their level to play with, and the wrong level of seriousness (both too high and too low). Two players felt that women were a destructive influence on guilds because of their rarity and their potential to be sources of conflict. Pre-existing groups within guilds were often seen as problematic by newer members, especially if that group had played another game together beforehand.

Nevertheless, those in guilds generally understood the benefits of being in them to be substantial. For those seeking raids it was a question of practicality, but this masks a more important social phenomenon. Players generally disliked the uncertainty of "pick up groups" ("pugs"), which can often generate conflicts between players with different expectations for friendliness, sharing, leadership or roles. One player said his motivation to be in his guild was simply that "I know them better than random people."

Far more common than basic familiarity was some shared ethic or bond. Many players were quite happy with the level of seriousness, the guild leader and usually with their guild mates. The single most common response was that the player liked his/her guild mates and saw them as helpful and friendly. Others liked the sense of belonging and the opportunity to help create a social entity that might reflect some of its prestige on them individually and collectively. A typical response was:

> I like the members that i have met they are very nice and willing to help you out. We set up certain times for us to be on so a group of us play together. We help each other with quests. High level members have helped me with getting bags and equipment and didn't charge me. Just respect for one another and the overall friendship so far.

Few players expected to leave their current guild soon. Of the things that would make them leave, leadership was prominent. As one noted, "poor leadership is the death of a group."

Leadership

Guild leaders (know as "GMs" for guild masters, not to be mistaken with the "GM" that is a game master, or Blizzard customer service worker) were a key component to the survival and progress of nearly every guild. Rank-and-file members recognized the crucial roles and responsibilities of GMs even while their preferences for leadership styles varied. As one member put it, leadership in WoW takes "serious energy, charisma, vision, politics and personality." Smaller guilds flourished when GMs facilitated social support. In larger guilds in which demand for membership was high, GMs were able to enforce codes of ethics, police disputes, coordinate scheduling and even impose lofty guiding philosophies. Some large guilds functioned as a virtual barracks; these were task-oriented military-style hierarchies. Others managed to maintain casual social atmospheres more akin to a children's tree house play space even as they tackled difficult group tasks. There was clear evidence that the majority of players wanted a firm leader to enforce norms and policies. One player said the ideal GM is "Impartial. Strong. Consistent." Leaders who were seen as inconsistent or unethical quickly lost their positions or saw their guilds break up via quitting members or even coup détats.

What was clear was that being a GM is a difficult task, made all the more remarkable by the fact that it is voluntary and rarely comes with any particular reward. The sample captured nine GMs, giving us insight into their perspectives as well as the members'. Some felt that it was a casual position, but most devoted significant time and energy to the job. A handful gave out their phone numbers and made themselves accessible to handle disputes even when not playing. As one GM put it, "running a guild is freaking ridiculously difficult."

GMs also had to coordinate relationships with other guilds. Mergers between small guilds were common as the membership approached the end game and sought larger numbers to tackle that large-group content. Yet these mergers were often as contentious as any real-world corporate merger. The task of two distinct groups combining often lead to shakeout periods and conflicts over style. As one GM put it just after a merger, “I don't mind 'em one bit. It's just my folks got ‘culture shock.’”

Less common were intra-guild intrigues such as spies placed inside another organization, the poaching of top players, shared chat channels between guilds, and the occasional rivalry—but because the game mechanics do not allow for much intra-faction conflict, these rivalries rarely mattered.

Individual-level patterns

The notion of social capital formed and lost, bridged and bonded, resonated through every interview in our sample. Players were keenly aware of the benefits and costs of starting, maintaining and ending friendships formed through WoW. Given the immense amount of time these players spent with each other this is perhaps not surprising. What was striking was how much sociability occurs over and above basic game play. Roughly 70% of the interviewees said that they chatted regularly with their guild mates about topics ranging from game strategy to real-life personal issues. As one player jokingly explained, “this game is more like World of Chatcraft for me.”

Real life vs. WoW: Social support

For many WoW players, interactions with their fellow gamers—whether in the form of ad hoc pick-up groups or with guild mates—have a range of practical benefits for accomplishing game goals. The other players are clearly the means to an end: "by the time you get to the end you need groups and friends to get anything worth while done." Yet the true phenomenon of interest was the extent and means by which players acquired social capital in the course of this play. A small number of people felt that the other players were never socially significant, e.g. "they are nameless people to me, not to sound rude." However, most players identified the social value of being in a guild.

As noted above, for many the game was simply another way to maintain existing relationships with family, co-workers or friends. In this sense, WoW is like several other communication tools on the Internet (instant messenger, chatrooms, email) in that it is an extension of pre-existing offline interactions (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Wellman et al., 2003). As one player put it succinctly, "since we can't golf, we WoW." For these players, bonding social capital was clearly maintained and reciprocated through game play:

> I've become closer to some of my [real-life] friends thanks to WOW....cause it gives u more to talk about and shared experiences and it's weird but if you go to the extra mile for a friend in game they respect u more in real life...plus they know if they piss me off in real life I wont heal them :P

Maintaining existing ties was especially notable for geographically dispersed friends and relatives:

> I suppose in a way this is a way for us to socialize and do things together despite distance. I think WoW just makes it easier for us to keep in touch as old friends and do something together.

With at least of a third of all guild players playing with real-life friends, this was a key phenomenon.

For guild mates with no previous real-life ties, the immediate impacts were much more likely to be of the bridging social capital type. Playing together in a guild made it possible for them to get in touch with a broad range of people from different ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. What's more, these people might be demographically diverse, but they begin their relationships with a common interest:

> I have more in common with my online friends than I do my offline. RL friends are limited to who I've met at work or thru other work friends. On the internet, I have a MUCH larger pool of people.

Common participation in group activities such as questing and trading, and chatting casually with text and voice fosters constant, albeit casual, socialization without requiring previous real life acquaintance. Yet players were keenly aware of the difference between casual friendships and deep ones; interviewees' guild-based social ties fell evenly across this spectrum.

Some considered the connections within the game to be as "real" as any "real-life" friendship, and described situations that could only be described as strong, bonding-type social support, such as having someone to listen to personal problems: "sometimes u just need an ear. somebody to listen to u rant." These kinds of initially bridging relationships did in fact lead to significant depth and bonding for a small portion of players. For example:

> When you have 146 ppl asking where u are and telling u that they miss you, yeah it gets as important . . . Bonds form to were they are just as real as ppl I see every day especially with [voice] . . . to me they are RL friends. They mean as much to me as my RL friends. I spend as much time with them as I do RL friends.

Yet it was more common for players to consider their guild mates as something of a hybrid of tight real-life bonds and a group of relative strangers. Several described a clubhouse feeling that recalls Meyrowitz' (1985) notions of moratorium via electronic media; these were companions with whom the person's normal rules of behaviour were

suspended, but with whom they could engage in semi-deep conversations and banter. In that sense, the typical guild sounded very much like one of Oldenburg's third places, a kind of virtual *Cheers*:

> *We are just a bunch of people who like to do stuff together and have a good time, like when you were a kid. It's lighthearted. We joke a lot and are just generally close to each other. [The guild is] important enough that I look forward to doing stuff with them, just questing and chatting together . . . we make each other laugh and it's a comfortable feeling. We tease each other and talk about RL and in game.*

Yet as Meyrowitz also notes, the impacts of relative anonymity cut both ways. It often proves to be an obstacle for guild mates to develop in-depth relationship and exchange advice for personal issues and emotional support. Some of this is due to channel complexity: Many guilds rely on textual chat as the only channel for socialization, and use voice communication and other online media mainly to coordinate game-related actions rather than to "hang out." The lack of visual or audio cues makes MMO gaming a social channel that is poorer than face-to-face interactions. Players recognize this distinction and nearly always drew sharp distinctions between real-life friendships and what they should expect from game-based ones:

> RL friends are multi dimensional. WOW friends are focused on a single point of contact. The world of shared experiences in WOW may be more similar, however is very narrowly focused. The friendship in WOW is focused on gameplay, on shared experience there and a bit of banter outside of there about topical things. It is superficial . . . WOW builds RL friendships, just as any other shared activity would. You go bowling with your friends, have a party, go to a movie, spend a few hours on like, etc. it is just another social activity to share. It can be a vessel for such, yes. (But) it is narrowly focused, remote, and safe from an emotional viewpoint."

Several drew parallels between guild mates and co-workers: they are friends you might enjoy and even share private information with, but if they moved jobs, you'd never see them again. Another manifestation of this was the recognition of boundaries: Some players had no problem talking about their children (or parents), sports or movies, but felt

uncomfortable with more adversarial topics like politics or religion. The online "climate" (Price, Nir, & Capella, 2006) was rarely conducive to contentious topics.

In sum, the depth of relationships varied widely across our interviews. On one side were pre-existing real-world friends who used WoW as simply another channel in which to strengthen and maintain existing ties. This was roughly one third of all players, far more than had been previously expected (Yee, 2006, in press). Next were the handful of new friends who met, bonded and extended those relationships back out into real-life. This was perhaps five percent of players. After that were the large number of players—a third to a half—who used their guilds as more casual third places that generated bridging social capital, but rarely bonding. And the remaining players, perhaps a quarter overall, saw their guild mates as not particularly important to them past their usefulness in accomplishing game tasks.

Player types

By player types, we do not mean to delve into player's motivations, as in a discussion of Bartle's types (Bartle, 1996). Rather, we mean what types of players populate guilds and what roles do they take on? The best demographic data on MMO players is still self-reported (Yee, 2006, in press), and so is not rock-solid evidence of who populates these games. Our interviews were not a tool to settle those issues beyond a quick note on age and personality. It was immediately apparent that maturity is a central issue for guilds. Those that were explicit about their expectations of mature behavior (usually high, but occasionally low) had happier members. Often, but not always, the preference for mature guild members came from players of college age or older. Younger players were consistently described as less mature, less willing to contribute to general

goals and activities and less able to work well in teams. As to personality, the interviewees demonstrated a wide range of them. Our ethnographic measures did not include standard personality or psychographic tests, so this remains to be tested systematically. In the mean time, we will let one particularly colorful interviewee describing his guild mates demonstrate the variation that exists:

> *I'd say they're best described as a hybrid of avid role players with Viking egos and closet homosexuals with fung-shui haircuts, but they're not bad people and some of them lead normal, healthy lives.*

Group structure and social capital

In our earlier section on group-level patterns, we discussed the wide spectrum of formal practices adopted within guilds. Guilds can have a relaxed atmosphere with corresponding structure ("the tree house"), or they can be highly structured, hierarchical organizations ("the barracks"). Both can be social environments. Interestingly, we found that the majority of our high-centrality respondents belonged to the more structured types, whereas low-centrality respondents tended to be affiliated with unstructured groups. In other words, players in formally structured guilds tend to have a more social experience than others. This positively affects the quality of their time in the game. For example, one of our participants (a central player in a highly structured guild) reported that "There's a synergy [in this guild] that I find awesome haha, makes me giddy as &@#^ when it happens." The selectivity of structured guilds (which, as described earlier, often involve probationary periods) might play an important role in helping players "fit" within the guild's social network right away, as another participant suggests: "We intend this guild to be good… we don't try to recruit as many people as we can, we get to know people we recruit first so that way, we know people's habits, playtime, etc."

In contrast, many of our low-centrality respondents emphasized the quasi-random process through which they joined their guild and/or its complete lack of organization. One said "it seems that we are just a bunch of folks that tripped over a guild and got invited, so to speak." The lack of clear objectives do not encourage guild mates to connect with each other, as another participant clearly described: "This guild was just for helping low lvl players when they started… [but] we always go different places. I usually group with people that I see on my way."

Here it is important to note that WoW provides very little support for guilds "out of the box." The only game-based tools available are a guild roster and a reserved guild chat channel accessible to all members. Any formal organization beyond this has to come from the players themselves. Yet the quality of a player's social relationships can be directly affected by his/her guild's level of organization. It is therefore clear that increasing the level of organizational support to guilds could help promote vibrant, self-sustaining player communities, as others have previously argued (Steinkuehler, 2004).

The roles of central players

We described in the Methods section how we used social network analysis to segment the player population into groups based on their centrality. As with any form of social network analysis (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), it is important to understand how the ties between participants were constructed. In our case, we connected individuals based on the time they spent together in a group with their guild mates. But while this is a good indicator of the prevalence of joint activities in guilds, it says nothing about the nature of these activities. For instance, it is possible to imagine some players spending

most of their group time simply chatting with each other, while others would focus exclusively on achievement and instrumental coordination to the detriment of socializing.

The interviews we conducted with high-centrality players revealed a broad range of behaviors. From these, we were able to construct several "idea types" (Weber, 1949) reflecting the diverse roles central players can play in a guild. Unsurprisingly, an important number of central players focused their time in WoW on social interaction. They participated in joint activities with other guild members simply for the sake of their company—the nature of the activities did not matter much. However, centrality does not necessarily imply sociability. As one player remarked, raids and other high-end group activities do not lend themselves well to informal conversation between the guild members: "Raiding is very focused. You can't have a casual conversation and raid at the same time."

Moreover, centrality also does not necessarily imply authority. Few of our high-centrality interviewees, for instance, turned out to be the official leaders of their guild. However, many often had influence over smaller units in the guild. These "team leaders" help the guild run smoothly by coordinating the activities of players during quests or instances: "As officers, we help whomever is leading the raid with keeping everyone working together."

Interestingly, for some, guild leadership was an extension of their life at work that naturally transferred to the game world: "It's a natural role… I manage them at work… so it's easy here." Former leaders also described how they remained influential in the guild by becoming "advisors," echoing Kim's taxonomy of player role progression (Kim, 2000). Here central players apparently reached their position by sharing knowledge with

guild mates prior to and during joint activities: "I'm not really so much an active raid leader as I am an advisor to raid leaders… advisor is what all great leaders do after retiring."

Yet another category of players interacted with many of their guild mates through the unusual game activities they organized, including economic warfare and lively scavenger hunt competitions. Finally, some players were highly conscious of their social position as network hubs. These "networkers" saw connecting with other players as an intricate part of the game and a valuable resource to use later on:

> I ain't a conquistador, I'm a leader… my influence is everywhere man. It's called time compounding. I used to own a business, so I learned about having a network.

One interviewee explicitly stated that he wanted to cultivate real-world business opportunities by establishing a strong network within the game.

Low centrality players: A methodological caveat

As our interviews progressed, it became clear that the number of variables leading to a player's low centrality is large and the social history of a "peripheral" player is often more nuanced than indicated by the numbers. One player, for instance, reported that: "It's become an inactive guild over the last 2 or 3 months. I suspect that I'm the last person in it who plays with any regularity." Of course, this "survivor" appeared to have a very low centrality, yet he used to play an active role in his guild before its disappearance. This highlights the need for better controls when considering low centrality players. A metric reflecting a player's centrality over a longer period of time, for example, would have been particularly useful. Also problematic was the confound of "main" versus "alt" characters. Most WoW players have multiple characters even when they primarily play

only one. Yet these "alts" were counted as equivalent in our initial player census efforts. Their mere presence helped establish cut-points for what a "high" or "low" centrality player is. So, while we are confident that our high centrality players are high because we set a high numerical floor for them, we are hesitant to offer strong conclusions about the roles and habits of low-centrality players.

The Role Play Factor

There is very little empirical evidence on the extent to which people role play when they play games. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that when there are no role play rules, few gamers act as anything other than themselves (Schiano & White, 1998; Stromer-Galley & Martey, 2003). Further evidence has suggested that players role play to work through personal issues, such as deciding what kind of person they truly are or hashing through Freudian conflicts from their childhood (Turkle, 1995). We saw no strong evidence to support the latter phenomena, which could be a function of the relatively short interview sessions; getting into serious personal issues would have required longer interviews with more trust built up over time.

What was abundantly clear, however, is that people on RP servers are playing another game entirely. The guild life, social connections, player roles and player behavior were all different on RP servers because of the meta-level difference in rule sets. True role players talk "in character." That is, if they are 32-year old female from New Jersey playing a male night elf, they talk like the night elf, not the woman. Yet for even the most dedicated RPers, there is usually the ability to talk "OOC," or "out of character," and to be their "true" real-life persona. On that level, the guild politics and behaviors were

largely similar to those found on the other server types. One notable exception might be the role of gender on RP servers. Players' sex lives played a larger role, as did flirting, dating and even real-life cheating and promiscuity. According to one female interviewee, this is the result of two things: the very aggressive nature of female players on RP servers and the relative scarcity of dominant "alpha male" male players. These conclusions are based on a handful of interviews and so remain tentative. However, we suspect that they would be rich material for future research on gender, sex, and anonymity with respect to the nature of online role play.

Discussion

Our combined ethnographic/social network census method explored a range of research questions centered on organizational communication, political communication and civic life, and computer-mediated communication. We created typologies of basic guild types and player roles and discovered a series of player behaviors that were influenced by the game's mechanics, by the interface and by players' own choices. In organizational design, player guilds were clearly fit the network form because they use "flexible, dynamic communication linkages to connect multiple organizations into new entities" (Monge & Contractor, 2001, p. 448). Player behaviors and group behaviors varied due to game goals, personal preferences and player awareness, even in the relatively formal barracks-like raiding guilds. But the governing computer codes were ultimately foundational rather than entirely imposing. By analogy, we find that playing WoW is as social as a team sport, which has its own rules, literal boundaries and social norms. Within those, there are still self-initiated tactics, team strategies, styles and goals

that make the play space a stage for socialization, organization and networks that often have little to do with the original game. Roles can and must be flexible as conditions and goals change. In this sense, the locus of control is shared by producer and the consumer-socializers, paralleling many debates within cultural studies (Brantlinger, 1990; Fiske, 1997; Hall, 2000; Hay, Grossberg, & Wartella, 1996).

Whoever is causing the outcomes, there is no doubt that social capital was created along the way. These players were not "bowling alone." We do not mean to suggest that MMOs are a panacea for civic revitalization. Rather, they appear to be a place where such revitalization is possible, for some players, and in a new way. For players who knew each other beforehand, WoW was an important way for them to maintain and even reinforce their relationships. For most others, it was an entrée to bridging social capital that could build up into something more over time—ranging from a few weeks to a year. For most, this was akin to a mild form of bonding found in real-world third places. Still, only a handful of players felt that these relationships mattered more than "real" life ones.

Our research was the first of its kind, yet dealt with a range of obstacles that will confront any similar future work. Chief among these is securing access to the database of players and the logs of player behavior, some of which are collected by the commercial firms operating the games and some of which are not collected at all. Truly unobtrusive accounts of player behavior would allow for a contrast between what players thought and what they actually did. Getting access to account data would be equally useful. For example, our bot-based method could not disentangle the difference between players and their multiple characters. And no researcher has been able to construct a truly representative basic profile of players, even for variables as basic as gender and age.

Thus, a random survey of players, conducted in coordination with a dataset of player accounts, would be a key step forward in MMO research.

This largely exploratory study sought to answer fundamental research questions and to map out some basic phenomena. In doing so, it generated many questions worthy of more detailed future exploration. What exactly is the role of VoIP in online social processes? Does it make groups more social or simply more efficient, or does it introduce social cues that might create more distance between players? This would seem to be an ideal space to explore CMC issues, particularly by using social information processing theory (Walther, 1992, 1996). Issues of identity are another fertile area for future exploration. The management of gender in these player guilds, along with the unexpected vibrance of the role-playing community, suggests future research focused on those subgroups. Indeed, the role players appear to be playing another game entirely. What drives these people to engage in these practices? Are they enabling or inhibiting social capital, or are they working out internal psychosocial processes (Erikson, 1959)? How is race being managed within the anonymity of avatar space (Nakamura, 2001), and how does that change as players learn each others' back-stage information (Meyrowitz, 1985)?

Lastly, we were struck by the large number of players with previous offline connections playing WoW. There is room for a more detailed explanation with a larger sample or more in-depth analysis, answering questions about the individual and the broader civic life of the United States. As Putnam has chronicled, the civic life of the country has been in radical decline, but there appear to be resurgences of community in WoW and similar "places." The results here spoke directly to the need for community and the lengths to which game players will go to get, and keep it. An exploration of

atomized Americans and their search for friends, lovers and community must now account for new, dynamic environments like WoW. Even as players flock to online spaces—perhaps to find that missing sense of community—they are inevitably affected by game code created by designers wholly unaware of larger civic issues.

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