The Changing Dynamic of Social Interaction in World of Warcraft: The Impacts of Game Feature Change.

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how changes in game features through patches and expansions can affect the social interaction within massively multiplayer games. Since patches and expansions are now commonplace within massively multiplayer games, understanding of the relationship would enable better production of social capital. In-depth interviews uncovered that the recent changes to the World of Warcraft affect in-game social interaction in 3 aspects. The areas of social interaction affected included interpersonal relationships, community size and social alienation. The discussions highlight how these findings can advance models of social interaction within MMOs.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.8.0 [**Computing Milieux**]: Personal Computing - Games; J.4 [**Computer Applications**]: Social and behavioral sciences

General Terms
Human Factors, Theory

Keywords
Social interaction, Social computing, MMO Game

1. INTRODUCTION
The massively multiplayer online games (MMO) are highly social games consisting of platforms where players can chat and interact with one another. Socialization, therefore, is an integral aspect of the MMO. Factors facilitate socialization can be a player's personality type [11] or game mechanics [12]. Study on game mechanics [12] usually compare social interaction between 2 or more games with completely different game play architectures.

This neglects how more subtle changes, such as those introduced by game patches or expansions could affect social interactions. Hence, this paper draws on the symbolic interactionism theory to understand how game features can affect social interaction within World of Warcraft (WoW).

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Change in game features
WoW's recent TBC expansion has changed a number of features. Some of the prominent ones include: smaller raid caps, an arena battle system and an additional mode of difficulty.

End game dungeons traditionally allowed up to 40 players for a joint venture. The introduction of TBC has reduced this raid cap limit from 40 to 10 and 25. The arena battle system, introduced by a patch, allowed for player-versus-player (PvP) game play where players can form small teams to engage in death match style battles for points. A number of the TBC instances are also implemented with two modes of difficulty – normal and heroic. The heroic difficulty instance is more challenging, but rewards gamers with better equipment.

2.2 Theoretical assumptions
The symbolic interactionism theory posits that people gain meaning about the world through interaction with the social and physical environments [15]. These social processes shape understanding of perceived norms and roles existent within societies.

Using the symbolic interactionism theory, Chen and Duh [3] argue that social interaction in WoW can be understood through expression of the Self and view of the Other. In-game and contextual factors influence the dynamic of social interaction. The in-game factors include social norms and collaborative mechanism. This study places emphasis on in-game factors, that is, to develop an understanding of how changes to game features and subsequent collaborative structure can affect in-game social interaction. The research question is: How do changes to game features affect social interaction in WoW?

3. METHODOLOGY

Fourteen WoW gamers were recruited through snowball sampling for interviews in 2008. Participants were aged from 18 to 28 (*M*=23), 11 being males. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour and tape-recorded. The interview questions are semi-structured. The interview asked participants about how specific changes in game features had affected their social interaction. The features that were asked included: (a) heroic difficulty mode, (b) reduction in raid caps, (c) arena and (d) changes in equipments. The questions asked in the latter part of the interview cohered to the self-other model [3].

The transcripts were read once through to get a general feeling of the participants' gaming experiences. After which, a process of coding was undertaken whereby the data was coded line by line into specific concepts of interactional change. The codes were derived through the symbolic interactionism framework. These codes were then grouped into themes and sub-themes based on importance, prominence and similar topic areas [6]. Lastly, a review of the themes was carried out, examining the interrelationships between the themes and comparing it against existent theoretical frameworks.

4. RESULT

Through analysis, it was found that the changes in social interaction can be categorized into 2 different areas: (a) interpersonal relationship, (b) community size.

4.1 Interpersonal Relationship

The concept of "closeness" and enriched friendships were touched upon by all respondents. Generally, it was felt that the changes in game features had the potential to boost the trust and intimacy of interpersonal relationships. Ten interviewees indicated strong affections for their friends after engagement in the new game features.

4.1.1 Richer but lesser relationships

Online relationships are often characterized with having more breadth than depth [10]. The changes in World of Warcraft, however, appear to favor building depth over breadth in online relationships.

The lowered raid cap, for example, gives the player a chance to know each of their guild mates more personally. With less people to interact with, a player has a chance to know each other better. Similarly, arena team locks fix players with specific team mates over a lengthy period of time. All these compulsory groupings encourage a player to become more acquainted with their team or guild mates. At the same time, the smaller raid sizes favor a more compact community size. As guild sizes are reduced, displaced members would form guilds of their own, creating a larger number of small and closely knit guilds.

4.1.2 Trust and coordination

Respondents mentioned that the heightened difficulty of raid and heroic instances have increased the interdependency between players, encouraging deepened interpersonal relationships. In order to overcome the toughened game obstacles, players need to develop coordination, which entails both trust and commitment.

"I think the biggest element is the kind of adversity that brings us together. The kind of problems that we need to solve together."

Besides increased difficulties, the unpredictability of PvP game features also reinforced need for coordination. With dynamic game difficulties, the only constant that a player can count on are his collaborative partners.

It appears that the increased interdependence had nurtured social roles which embody qualities of faithfulness. The act of "being there for their friends" characterized their positive interactional experiences and gave them personal satisfaction. Respondents also gave negative comments to those who did not keep to these social roles, saying that they "burnout easily", are "selfish" and "antisocial". The interdependence required in the new game features, therefore, has also shifted notions of proper social roles and norms [17].

Underlying the improvement in coordination is the need for openness. The ability to be frank with another, giving critiques, both good and bad, is an essential foundation to improvement of teamwork and relationships. Such disclosures, however, entail a certain level of risk. Respondents describe a dilemma in providing what appears to be conflicting requirements for teamwork – honest evaluations and respect for the other.

"You talk to them to improve on certain areas but some people are so sensitive… If you tell them something, they will leave the group."

As seen from this account, critiquing a player's game play exposes vulnerability on the part of the giver and receiver. The giver worries if such comments might be misunderstood as insults, while the receiver, through reflected appraisals, may suffer attacks to his self-worth [7]. To secure positive outcomes from such disclosures, players need to both receive and deliver criticisms with tact. To cope with this situation, respondents reported using ritualized strategies of considerateness, facework management and gloss circumspection [2]. These strategies are paramount in maintaining and enhancing relationships.

"The most important thing about arena is about tolerating each other… I mean it is easy for anyone to say, "You are lousy, you are the cause of our loss." So if you don't have people who are willing to take you in and get you up to that point, you will never improve."

The increase in interdependence, if worked out well, forges stronger group identities. Respondents consistently referred to their teams when recounting memorable gaming experiences. The use of a pluralistic *we* underline the importance of the team. Jack said, "When we down the boss, everybody shouts, "We did it! We did it!"" The increase in transient group emotions bears strong weight in evolving group identity. Transient emotions of happiness and excitement tend to develop into a long-term emotion of pride and solidarity which are essential to team identity [5]. .

4.2 Community Size

Ten respondents reported that the guild sizes have dwindled after the change in game features. The change in game features played an important role in formulating smaller social groups due to two

reasons. First, the new WoW environment encourages players to interact with familiar faces, discouraging the creation of ad hoc collaborative ventures with strangers (also known as pickup groups or PUGs). Second, small social groups have become self-sufficient; once a player is within such a group, there is no more incentive to get to know new players. As such, people withdraw contact with unfamiliar faces, limiting the number of new contacts a player can make.

4.2.1 Uncertainty with new collaborations

In-game collaborations often take place when players desire to overcome difficult game obstacles that cannot be solitarily managed. However, since formation of groups takes time, and victory is never guaranteed, players have to deal with a certain level of uncertainty. As a result, many players become hesitant to collaborate with PUGs. One respondent said:

> "As the dungeon is harder, people tend to be pickier about who they choose. There is a sense of uncertainty in pickups. If you die you waste gold and time."

The perceptions of uncertainty can also be worsened by negative experiences. Half of the respondents were able to relate negative experiences with which left them with a mistrust of PUGs.

> "I have been on one really bad experience where I was in a rather easy heroic instance, and I was in it for 4 hours. People were so unhappy with how the tank was holding threat that they started leaving. So after that I stopped playing with pickup groups"

The negative experiences also consist of emotional distress. These negative emotional experiences further reduce the chances that players would be willing to group with random players.

However, even if players do end up creating PUGs, low trust also causes other problems. Six respondents complained about group members who would leave in the middle of a dungeon crawl.

As per the prospect theory, people make decisions based upon the likelihood of probable outcomes [16]. Since the initial trust of success is low, the first sign of trouble reinforces the belief that a negative outcome is imminent [13]. Hence, players may choose to cut their losses early and leave the group immediately [1]. Such non-committal behaviours increased the amount of uncertainty faced and create a recursive problem of failed PUG collaborations.

4.2.2 Self sufficiency of small social groups

Guilds and communities compose of a large part of a player's gaming experience. Since interactions occur mostly between guild members (especially at endgame), a change in the size of guilds directly influences a player's interactional environment. The lowered raid size, in particular, has caused many guilds to become smaller. As a respondent observed, "Guilds have become smaller in size. You will see lots of nameless guilds just popping out of nowhere."

3 respondents, who were in large guilds, said that the reduction in raid size had redefined their situations, hence creating the need to renegotiate their relationships. Functional relationships, therefore, are destabilized, and many peripheral members ended up excluded from the raid groups.

> "It makes a difference when the raid slots are reduced. You have a fixed team of 40 men already, then it is becomes 25 spots. Obviously those with higher ranks one will go first."

Due to the reduction of raid size and the competition of limited raid spots, many large guilds started to downsize, removing members from their guild roll. Many displaced members chose to form smaller social groups of their own.

> "We created our own guild because, at that time, most of the guilds are already very established. So if we join them, we don't have a chance to raid straightaway, so what we did is a shortcut. We formed our own guild, asked people if they want to join us so we can start straightaway."

Social networks have switched from large and shallow to small and dense. Many of these social groups build up strong relational ties and become accustomed to working together. They are also self-sufficient; able to do engage in most game content without the help of additional guild members. The self-sufficiency also means that the rewards for helping new players have diminished. In fact, the varied options of different game features reinforce perceptions of self-efficacy, that players can and should help themselves instead of pleading help from others.

> "I think after *Burning Crusade*, there are not many communities that try to help new players ... if you don't have good enough gears, you just have to do more heroic dungeons and get badge rewards. Rather than helping them to do things, like in the past, we now expect them to help themselves."

All respondents appear to prefer smaller and familiar collaborations. Respondents used terms such as "keeping things small" and "quality over quantity" signifying a shift in preference.

4.2.3 Communication style

Even though online environments mitigates the reservations people have in talking to strangers [9], the number of people who are purview to the conversation still affects the nature and amount of disclosure [14]. A respondent mentioned:

> "During 40 man raids, you feel a bit lost sometimes. I am more private so it is strange for me to start speaking up. I do know some people who are more vocal, but it is usually like a handful. I will just send "tells" to my friends in 40 man groups, but when it is 25 or 10, you feel more comfortable talking to the entire raid."

Another respondent also observed a deconcentration of communication after the drop in raid sizes, "40 man, you will see more vocal people chatting, while other people will be quiet ... but with the 10 man instance, all the 10 people will chat." Unlike large groups where communication is usually relegated to a limited few individuals, the increased privacy had equalizing effect, where communication is now more evenly spread amongst all individuals of a group.

The decrease of unfamiliarity leads to lessened communication anxiety. Respondents reported feeling "closer", "more comfortable" and finding it "easier to talk", all indicating that large group sizes have a suppressing effect on communication.

The lowering of raid caps also means that less communication rules have to be enforced during raids. Respondents explain that closed communication styles are often used in 40 man raids; discursive communication only exists between the raid leader and class leaders, all other communication is top-down so that instructions can be clearly delivered. With smaller raid sizes, players can talk without interfering into the success of raid runs.

> "With a 40 man raid, it is a messy affair. There are class leaders and they report to the raid leader… If you have 40 people talking, it is really chaotic, but now you only have 10 men talking so it is much easier."

Four respondents spoke about how the leadership communication styles affected the overall communication of raid members. Through the increased ease in management, raid leaders are now freed up to start chatting with their members. It is possible that members see the raid leader (high status individual) as the standard for social norms. If the raid leader adopts a task-orientated communication style, members may see that as an ideal norm and conform [4]. In addition, raid leaders may be seen as stronger authority figures in large crowds. As the raid leader starts talking, he develops friendships with members, which then disengages the members' self-regulatory communication mechanism [8].

In summary, interactions within MMOs are in a state of flux due to the addition of patches and expansions. Game feature changes affect interactions across 2 areas: interpersonal relationships and community size. This study has contributed to existing models of social interaction [3], highlighting the importance of studying emotions within MMOs

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study was conducted to investigate the relationship between game features and social interaction. The findings revealed the link between in-game socializations and game features. By understanding how these aspects of interaction work together, game designers would be better equipped to anticipate the effect of tweaking particular game features.

One limitation of the study is the lack of longitudinal data. To increase reliability, studies can be conducted pre and post the next expansion. Quantitative studies can also focus on specific notions, such as game enjoyment, social networks and relational depth. These elements would further our understanding of how WoW gamers react to changes in game features.

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