

An Online Community as a New Tribalism: the World of Warcraft

Thomas W. Brignall, III
Department of Sociology
Fisk University
Nashville, TN

Thomas L. Van Valey
Department of Sociology
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI
vanvaley@wmich.edu

Abstract

Massive, multiplayer online role-playing games foster rich social environments. Within the game, players can interact with other players, make friends, create and cultivate new online forms of community. Using participant observation and content analysis approaches, this study examines the World of Warcraft as an online community, and investigates the degree to which it exhibits characteristics of a new tribalism.

1. Introduction

Massive, multi-player, online, role-playing games enable enormous numbers of people to simultaneously play, interact, and socialize in an evolving virtual world by means of the Internet[1]. These games are distant relatives of the paper and pencil role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons and multi-user domains/dungeons. One of the latest such games, World of Warcraft (WOW), has a large fan base and is the current sales leader. According to its parent company,[2] on the first day of WOW's release, an estimated 250,000 copies were sold and over 200,000 players created accounts. By June of 2005, over two million paying subscribers were playing WOW[3].

Like other such simulations, WOW is a virtual world. It encompasses several land masses, ecosystems and terrains, multiple cities and smaller communities with their attendant economies (both cash and barter), and a wide variety of non-player characters, both human and other. Players can create a virtual identity (a character of a particular race, sex, class, and appearance) and adventure across this world, alone or together, "...forming friendships, slaying monsters, and engaging in epic quests that can span days or weeks." [4] The software must first

be purchased and installed, then there is a monthly fee to play the game. It requires a high-speed connection for satisfactory play, and a variety of different realms (servers) are available. If offline friends want to play together, they must choose the same realm.

Blizzard provides a variety of support mechanisms for WOW players. In addition to contacting technical and customer support staff, there is a web guide, extensive FAQs, and an early level guide (for new players). In addition, in the Community Section of the website, there are several pages of contests, wallpapers, comics, screenshots and other fan art, plus several web-based forums where players are encouraged to discuss features of the game with other players. However, there is also extensive guidance provided in the game itself. Players have the ability to talk and send mail among themselves and with non-player characters, and there are a number of helpful features that alert players to the people and places in their immediate environment, and opportunities to join groups (e.g., parties and guilds). Players may also select professions (e.g., mining, alchemy, herbalism) or receive training in skills associated with their particular character.

2. Player Motivations

We first became interested in studying WOW after reading about players of Everquest who had experienced real world problems such as failing classes and marriage problems.[5] One parent even attributed their son's suicide to Everquest.[6] Such reports raised questions about the motivations of the people who were playing such games.

Bartle initially suggested that there are several specific types of people who are motivated to play online role-playing games.[7] However, Yee has argued that Bartle's motivational types overlook

the complexity by excluding changes over time, overlap, or game situations.[8] According to Yee, a better way to understand player motivations is to view them as flexible components rather than fixed types. Consequently, Yee expanded Bartle's preliminary model and empirically tested the model via player surveys.[9] Yee used five components to characterize player motivations. Socializers are attracted to the elements of social interaction that occur in a massive, multi-player, online, role-playing game. Achievers like to meet goals, accumulate items, and/or gain power. Explorers are driven by the game mechanics and the desire to understand everything about the game. Escapists use the game for stress relief, to escape their everyday world, and/or to role-play different identities. Griefers like to manipulate, dominate, exploit, deceive, annoy, and/or taunt other players. They are interested in causing as much chaos as possible.[10]

Similarly, Kollock examined motivations for participating in online communities, and identified three that clearly apply to WOW. [11] Anticipated Reciprocity is essential for membership in parties and guilds. Increased Reputation, which is the same as increased level in WOW, is a primary goal of the game. This, of course, is similar to Rheingold's early identification of a desire for increased prestige.[12] Finally, a Sense of Efficacy derives from participating in group quests and contributing to the success of the quest. In WOW, these are necessary for making it to the highest levels.

3. Online Communities and the Propensity for Tribalism

Online communities offer individuals the ability to locate (at least in a virtual sense) and interact with other players who share a common identity or interests. WOW was explicitly designed to foster such socializing within the game. A simplistic view of tribalism suggests that it is the occurrence of groups and subgroups within existing social structures that divide into smaller subgroups, or tribes.[13] In this view, tribes form because of the desire of members to be among others with similar characteristics. (In WOW, an illustration would be the guilds. These are made up of players with similar interests, and provide opportunities for social interaction, assistance with quests, and protection from rival factions.) However, because of the breakdown of the general population into smaller, more isolated groups, tribalism frequently results in power struggles, competition, and a "we" versus "they" mentality. Eventually, various tribes within

the social structure become openly hostile towards other tribes.

Another view of tribalism is similar to primitivism. This is a perspective that promotes a return to humanity's social roots and the environment. Primitivists believe that civilization is the primary threat to the future of humanity. Philosophers like Quinn and Zerzan believe the solution to the problems associated with modern civilization is the pursuit of a new tribalism.[14] This movement revolves around what Quinn argues are the defining characteristics of tribal life: open, egalitarian, and cooperative communities.[15] Quinn argues that civilizations have replaced tribalism with hierarchy, which works for those with wealth and power, but not for the masses.

Zerzan argues further that humanity's problems started with the embrace of symbolic culture.[16] In his view, culture is not the great emancipator of humanity. Language, numbers, art, and music are merely simulacra of reality, and technology is not neutral. Instead, technology reinforces the basic values of the social structure which are established and maintained by those in power. Zerzan contends that the solution is the rejection of civilization, with its signs, technology, and materialism, and a move towards a new tribalism.

In contrast, there are other authors who believe the Internet has the potential to help flatten hierarchies, dilute power from traditional elites who monopolize information, permit new forms of community, make citizen activism easier and more effective, and encourage a generally self-reflective society.[17] From their perspective, therefore, Internet technology may also facilitate movement toward a new tribalism. Putnam's[18] work on the breakdown of community and the need for stronger social bonds lends support to this position, yet raises questions about the nature of the relationships that are established.

Some theorists are concerned about whether experience with simulations can be used to explain new behavior patterns or events. Baudrillard argues that simulations are "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." [19] In his view, simulations no longer try to imitate, duplicate, or parody the real. Instead, simulations are the substitution for the real. However, most interactions within a simulation like WOW do parallel the real world since they reinforce the accumulation and/or the consumption of various objects or abilities (e.g., money, points toward level of play, weapons). Deleuze [20] for example, contends that not all simulations are copies in search

of being an equivalent to the original. This would certainly hold for WOW. Often the simulation becomes an entity, thus creating new space for the simulation's own proliferation and undermining the distinction between it and the reality or virtual reality it represents.

4. Research Methods

We began our study with a participant observation phase focusing on hardcore WOW players (someone who plays at least thirty-five hours a week). We decided to focus first on hardcore players and their behaviors because they appear to be the driving force behind the creation and sustained popularity of these complex simulations. Plus, they are easier to observe since they are consistently online, and make frequent contributions to the WOW social structure. However, we do recognize that, because of their heavy participation, they are also the individuals who are most likely to display behaviors that we would associate with both community and tribalism.

Initially, one of the authors literally became a hardcore player (10-12 hours per day) and carried out informal interviews with 34 other hardcore players over a span of fourteen weeks after WOW was first released. He repeated this level of play several months later. Each time there was a break in play, field notes of player interactions, common occurrences, and game observations were recorded. At the end of play for the day, the day's field notes were summarized.

The field notes were organized chronologically, with the date, time, and game location on each entry. They were then divided into separate categories of information: interviews, direct observations, and inferences (the separation of direct observations from inferences required us to distinguish our observations from our interpretations). The field notes and interviews were then coded and entered into a computer program (Hyper Research) by one of the authors (thus no need for inter-rater reliability checks). The resulting data were analyzed, allowing us to identify common occurrences and themes that were imbedded in the interview responses and observations.

Following the participant observation phase, the other author joined the game and undertook a form of content analysis of the various printed and electronic materials that are available in WOW (i.e., the printed game manual, and all the web-based materials - FAQs, guides, especially the Community Section). Since we were also able to look for common occurrences and themes in these materials,

we used them to supplement the observations that followed from the interviews with players. Following are some of the key themes that emerged from combining the two forms of analysis.

5. The Importance of Time

Time spent playing WOW was, of course, a dominant and important attribute of hardcore players. Twenty of the players interviewed reported playing five to six hours a day on weekdays and at least ten hours a day on weekends. Fourteen reported playing between eight to ten hours a day. Several of the players reported that on occasion they had played the game for twenty plus hours at a single setting. When players were asked how they could spend so much time playing WOW, the most frequent reason reported was being a student. Other reasons included underemployment, sparse homework, dropping out of college, and playing WOW at work. Two players indicated they had even taken vacations in order to play the game uninterrupted. When discussing time spent playing WOW, hardcore players often conveyed their respect for other hardcore players. For some hardcore players, playing more than thirty hours a week was a sign of a player's commitment, dedication, and reliance.

6. The Community Aspects of WOW

On its website, in its software, and in its press releases, Blizzard routinely refers to its subscriber base as the World of Warcraft *community*. It is clear that the designers built aspects of community into the game and they (or at least the marketers) view all the characters (both players and non-player characters) as participants in a virtual community. "The intent is to make you feel like a member of one enormous team, while at the same time setting up the other faction as an enemy or, at best, a rival." [21] Moreover, the WOW Rules of Conduct reinforce this perspective. For example, there are quite specific rules regarding character and guild names as well as interactions with other users, including chatting (e.g., nothing "...harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, hateful, sexually explicit, or racially, ethnically, or otherwise objectionable.") [22]

When the hardcore players were asked about their thoughts regarding the community aspects of WOW, twenty-five of the thirty-four reported they preferred socializing in WOW to offline socializing. They gave reasons such as feelings of strong friendship, group unity, the ability to role-play an

alternate identity, hanging out with people that had similar likes, social anonymity, and the ability to ignore disliked people. Several said it was easier to meet people in WOW. A few reported they had recently moved and did not know anyone in the new community. Thus, WOW was a way to hang out with their old friends. Several players also reported they felt more important in the game, were more able to freely express themselves, and that their online friends often understood them better than their offline friends. Several players also reported meeting people offline (e.g., dinner, parties, and movies) whom they first met via the game. In a few cases, players reported they “hooked up” with other players.

When the players were asked if their social lives had changed since they started playing WOW, a few said it had not. However, the majority commented that WOW had become, at least for the time being, their primary source of social interaction. Frequently, they reported that WOW took the place of other leisure activities like watching television or playing other video games. Nevertheless, some players insisted that WOW was a passing phase and they would eventually quit. Indeed, after the first month of WOW, it was common for players to make comments how they were spending too much time playing the game and would eventually quit the game.

Some of the players did relate difficulties. One player quit playing WOW because his/her partner left him/her for another person met while playing WOW. A few reported they were losing track of their offline friends. Three indicated that their spouses were getting frustrated with the amount of time they were spending playing WOW. Three others reported they could no longer play WOW because they were flunking out of school.

7. Tribalistic Behavior

There were frequent instances of tribalistic behavior within WOW. Indeed, WOW’s structure made tribalistic behavior hard to avoid. Groups of individuals were encouraged to form, organize, and compete against other similar groups. For example, there are two major factions in the game - “The Horde” and “The Alliance.” These factions are at war with each other, and it is impossible to communicate or interact with rival players (other than fighting them). A few months after its initial release, Blizzard implemented a system rewarding players with honor points when they killed players from the rival faction. This, of course, reinforced the sense of community of the players in each group as well as the separation between the two groups.

Similarly, the guilds provided opportunities for smaller groups to form. During our study, there were separate guilds created by players for Christians, gays, lesbians, evangelicals, males, particular age ranges, specific playing styles, for various of the in-game races, and for players at different levels. All of these identities and others were possible bases for group formation. As the game progressed, several guilds did either fragment or fold completely, although others were also formed.

The most common reason reported for a player leaving a guild was the desire to associate with players that had more similar identities and playing styles. The founder of one guild even complained about the frequent problems within the guild. He/she reported having to break up online fights between members of the guild. Playing with offline friends also created many occasions where feelings were hurt. Many of the hardcore players who left the guild also reported resenting other guild members. They believed some members did not contribute enough to the guild, complained too much, acted juvenile, or did not play WOW seriously enough.

By the same token, there were also numerous examples of individual player cooperation. A majority of the WOW players interviewed reported that they played frequently because of the feelings of group unity, friendship, cooperation, and accomplishment - all key elements of a sense of community. Some of the players promoted unity among the guilds and actively argued against infighting within the faction. They believed there was a need for cooperation to successfully fight the rival faction. Frequently, parties consisted of members from various guilds because they thought guild rivalry was a waste of time. They wanted to interact with likeminded individuals, whatever their affiliations in the game.

Some hardcore players did not join guilds. One player reported that he/she wanted to avoid the guild politics that she/he encountered while playing other games in the past. Many of the players who were unwilling to commit to a guild chose to play with a small group of other players. When asked why they were not part of a guild, they said they did not want the responsibilities or problems that came with guild membership. It was better for them to work together in a small, informal group and avoid any formal structure. Absent of guild membership constraints, everyone was free to do what they liked.

8. Player Motivations, WOW Structure, and Tribalism

Based on our interviews and observations, Yee and Kollock to have accurately reflected many of the reasons why people play WOW. The motivational components appeared to fluctuate on a frequent basis. The tribalistic restructuring of guilds clearly occurred as some players separated from players they disliked or no longer thought they could help them achieve their goals. This frequent abandonment of one group for another resulted in a social environment conducive to a form of neo-tribalism that sometimes verged on isolationism.

The structural environment of WOW also seemed to cultivate some of the more negative aspects of tribalism, such as quick judgments, prejudicial behavior, and stereotyping. The ease of avoiding others and the competitive aspect of the game facilitated the quick judgment of others, especially among the hardcore players. Frequently, Horde players perpetuated the view that most Alliance players were stupid, teen-age jocks, or griefers. While many players insisted "it is just a game," the conversations about players from the rival faction were frequently hostile and extremely personal.

WOW also contains what some might argue are prejudicial or negatively stereotypical overtones. The female characters had exaggerated proportions and wore tighter fitting clothing, and some of the jokes provided (as part of the game structure) for female characters were sexual in nature. Similarly, the trolls in the Horde had Jamaican accents, and some of the ogres danced like MC Hammer. The Tauren's, who resemble bulls, live in tepees and display several characteristics resembling "Native Americans." The only choice of skin color for the human, dwarf, and gnome races was white. Prejudicial conversations were also commonplace in WOW. Some players talked about "raping female enemy characters," and the chat channels teemed with racist comments.

Another aspect of WOW that appears to promote negative tribalistic behaviors is the lack of social control and social responsibility. For example, players can continually taunt and harass players they do not like, and that is acceptable as part of the game. When players were asked how they dealt with people they did not like, they reported that they kicked them out of the group and ignored them. In WOW, a player can add other players they dislike to an ignore list. Once on the ignore list, a player's communications are simply not displayed.

To be sure, not all aspects of the WOW community were negative. Several guilds frowned on prejudicial language and behavior, and some guilds kicked out players because of repeated

offensive behavior. Many of the top-ranked guilds helped new members rise in level quickly, and promoted the notion that guild members must share with others. We encountered players who were altruistic, helped new players complete quests, and shared resources with their companions. Indeed, the camaraderie that existed among many of the players is one of the key elements that makes it difficult to quit the game.

9. Observations

Virtual worlds are clearly not free from real world behaviors and prejudices. Because they are part of the assumptions that game designers make, stereotypes and cultural identities are frequently built into the game and also follow the players. Moreover, online anonymity does allow individuals to avoid what, in the real world, are the negative ramifications of being rude or prejudicial to other players. According to Blizzard's Rules of Conduct, they enforce policies that forbid prejudicial language. However, they have not published any information on how frequently they enforce this rule (although they did report closing several thousand accounts of people who had sold WOW materials on eBay). Thus, in a virtual world where individuals have few limits, can behave as they choose, and can avoid people they dislike, the hardcore players often employed tribalistic behaviors. Although some groups displayed high levels of unity and cooperation, there were frequent occurrences of groups fragmenting into smaller subgroups.

One might argue that WOW's lack of social boundaries is emancipating and thus a positive sign of neo-tribalism. Why associate with others who do not share a common identity? A player can ignore another player he/she does not like, go to another server, or quit the game. Players can choose to reject all social formalities and focus exclusively on social exchanges with players of similar beliefs. When hardcore players surrounded themselves with players they liked, an open, egalitarian, cooperative community frequently occurred. This is the hallmark of tribalism - the identification with one group and the separation from others.

Many of the social components within WOW facilitated the adoption of neo-tribalistic behaviors by many players. Making friends, socializing, cooperation, and the creation of new tribes are all components of WOW. These are features of WOW that are enjoyable, but as Yee suggests, individuals are attracted to different game aspects.[23] However, WOW is part of the gaming industry, and it was created for entertainment

purposes. Make no mistake, WOW's game dynamics center around competition. Without a rebellion of players within WOW demanding that players be given the ability to cooperate and communicate with any person, regardless of faction, it is our view that the current game dynamics favor negative rather than positive forms of neo-tribalism.

If what we witnessed is any indication of the majority of player social experiences and interactions, such games can also amplify a discourse of separation, competition, and antagonism against those who are different. WOW is a complex simulation, an alternate world in which players can do anything they want and have a vacation from their everyday lives. However, is it possible at some point that the people who engage in social interactions within a simulacrum, identify that space as real? At what point does it become difficult for players to separate their online and offline realities? If a hardcore player is a cyber-bully in the game, habitually terrorizing other players, is it possible this persona will be projected into his/her offline relations (or comes from it). From what we observed, it appeared that many of the players felt WOW was in some sense real. For some, the consequences of playing the game were real. Some of the hardcore players wanted to meet offline, would talk about personal problems, and referred to one another as friends. For some, WOW became their preferred space and the platform for much of their everyday social interaction. In short, the game was a real and important part of their life. Every player interviewed insisted he/she was able to separate and manage the two realities. However, they also frequently expressed the opinion that WOW life was better, or at least wished that offline social interaction was similar to WOW.

10. Conclusion

We believe it is important to study social interactions within these kinds of virtual communities because the future of Internet communications may be based on the kind of virtual technology that is used to create realistic fantasy games like World of Warcraft. As personal computing power increases and bandwidth becomes more accessible, it is not unreasonable to expect the internet to incorporate such technology. People already use the Internet to communicate with friends and family, and to meet new people (see for example, the success of eHarmony.com). Using these kinds of sophisticated simulation techniques, individuals could walk or drive around a virtual city, shop, and talk to local clerk avatars about products, or wander through a virtual library to browse before buying books.

People interested in finding new friends or dating could go to virtual bars where they can talk, exchange pictures, and reveal selective personal information to others before they decide to meet them offline.

We are also concerned, however, that the kind of community that exists in this and other virtual worlds is far different from the notion of community that is rooted in the small, rural village of the past. Because of the anonymous and computer-mediated nature of the interactions that take place, we are concerned that the relationships that are formed are not negotiated carefully or completely. Moreover, it is possible that they are often superficial in character and easily abandoned by the participants at the first sign of difference. The World of Warcraft certainly provides an outlet for those people who are looking for a semblance of community. However, at the same time, it also provides an escape for those people who cannot (or would rather not) engage in the real communities that surround them.

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