

LFG BRD PST: Initial Notes of an Ethnographic Foray into the World of Warcraft¹

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Abstract

Although online games and online gaming communities are not new, the rising interest in online games and the number of people playing online games has meant that such games (and the corresponding communities that seem to evolve out of them) have potential to be fertile ground for social researchers. One particularly useful method is that of virtual ethnographies, or participant observation in the game itself. Through an ethnography of a guild in the World of Warcraft, this paper attempts to map out the initial methodological challenges to the researcher who is considering undertaking such a study.

Introduction

Contrary to what the popular media might lead us to believe, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, or MMORPGs, is not the newest thing to hit the market, nor are they some novel strange phenomenon that surfaced when games like Second Life and World of Warcraft emerged. Instead, these games are better seen as a step in the evolution of role-playing games that started with pencils, paper, a bag of dice and some very fertile imagination. As a young boy, I remember sitting around with my friends, without a computer, engaging in giant robot combat through the RPG Robotech, and I knew other friends who dueled monsters and the like in games like Advanced Dungeons and Dragons.

Fast forward a couple of years, and these games have been adapted to be played on a computer, and over the World Wide Web (WWW). Initially, many games were text-based, involving players describing their actions or decisions using words – which meant that these games, known as MUDs, or Multi-User Dungeons, were very much like the pencil and paper games, only players interacted through a different medium, through

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computer mediated communication (CMC) rather than face to face (F2F) communications. In recent years, MUDs have begun to incorporate graphical interfaces, where players move computer generated animations through two / three dimensional worlds and interact with other players and computer generated characters over the WWW. These games have collectively become known as MMORPGs.

MMORPGs, thus, are similar and not entirely new, but this should not discount the possibility that they are interesting and worthy of investigation. Many scholars have used MUDs/ MMORPGs as instances of virtual communities (Duval Smith 1999, Reid 1999, Rheingold 1993) whilst others have taken them as empirical examples when considering methodological issues (Guimaraes 2004). One consistent area of methodological interest amongst scholars who look into MUDs / MMORPGs is that of virtual ethnographies, taking the MUD / MMORPG as a kind of virtual community.

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to approach my subject of study, an MMORPG known as "The World of Warcraft" (from here on referred to as WoW), as a virtual community in the most basic sense that it is comprised of a group of like minded individuals sharing a virtual space with common goals and shared interests. Although this definition is disputed and debated (and indeed it should be), that discussion would best be left for another paper. In this paper, I intend to give my initial experiences in conducting a virtual ethnography into WoW, and the methodological issues of access, boundaries, role and gatekeeper. I shall first begin with a brief consideration of the literature on virtual ethnographies.

Virtual Ethnographies

The concept of a virtual ethnography came into existence relatively late in comparison to more traditional forms of ethnographies with more restrictions in terms of physical boundaries and access. The term virtual ethnography is now usually used to define an ethnography that is conducted on a virtual community - these virtual communities can be located in message boards (Hine 2000, Donath 1996, Rheingold 1993) or emailing lists (Kozinets 2002, Wellman and Gulia 1999), to name but two. The greatest distinction between a virtual ethnography and a non-virtual, traditional ethnography is the location of the ethnographer in relation to the tribe that he is studying. In a virtual ethnography,

the ethnographer does not necessarily need to see the tribe members face to face, nor be privy to their physical interactions, because most interactions in a virtual ethnography take place online. The virtual ethnographer thus relies heavily on text, discourse and other online visual material to make his inferences and interpretations.

Others have written about conducting ethnographies online, with the terminologies and results equally as varied. Ward (1999) called her ethnography of two virtual communities a “cyber-ethnography”, and posited that a virtual community is a mixture of physical and virtual, and that neither world exists in isolation, which this author agrees with. Baym’s (1998) ethnography was a study of soap-opera enthusiasts on an online newsgroup posting, which as mentioned in the previous section focused largely on identity play and presentation of the self. Kozinets (2002) defines “netnography (as) ethnography adapted to the study of online communities”, and used it to examine an online coffee newsgroup.

Ethnographies of Online Games have largely centered on issues of identity, deception and community. There have been some that have focussed on the methodology of approaching such games, and there have been instances of anthropological departments conducting courses in the ethnography of the World of Warcraft. But for many ethnographers, the world of online gaming communities remains closed off, largely because gaining access requires knowledge of how to play a computer game, as well as dedication to exploring the game through play and interaction. If one has never engaged in one of these reflex-based, graphics-intensive, multi-tasking oriented, it may be prove more daunting than meeting a tribe of natives in a tropical jungle.

Thus, my aim when starting on WoW was to provide an account of my experience in conducting a virtual ethnography in-game. I will first give a brief background to the game, followed by my attempts at access and my initial experiences. I will then attempt to map out how the different ways that actors are grouping up in the game may constitute different levels of social intimacy and thus, different communities within the game that may warrant further study.

The World of Warcraft

The World of Warcraft, or WoW as it is commonly known amongst players, is an MMORPG based largely on previous games developed by an American-based computer games company known as Blizzard. Initially, Blizzard created a series of Real Time Strategy (RTS) games known as Warcraft (I, II and III) in which players controlled small armies, created resources and fought strategic battles (players could also play against other players over the Internet and through Local Area Networks). WoW is based on the “lore” of Warcraft, drawing on creatures, locations and stories told through the previous games. Since its inception, the game now boasts of about 9 million players around the world, and is widely seen as the frontrunner in the MMORPG genre of games.

In WoW, a player controls one character at any one time, moving him/her in a three-dimensional, computer-generated world of forests, deserts and dungeons. The game has multiple objectives, but by and large the player can choose to either play against the environment (PVE) – in which the player takes on largely computer generated opponents and challenges, or play against other players (PVP), where the player competes against other players to gain points. Most players engage in both aspects, and most have to engage in PVE play so as to “level up” their character – i.e. making their character more powerful and able to deal with other, more difficult challenges.

Leveling up a character involves moving around the game world killing computer generated opponents (known as “mobs”) and completing quests, which are given by friendly computer generated characters, known as Non-Player Characters, or NPCs. To a new player, the leveling process can be daunting, as one must learn not only the rules and mechanics of the game, but how to fight, craft objects, use spells and interact with other players.

Should the player stick out the leveling process and reach a high enough level, he/she will be able to access certain parts of the game known as an instance. An instance is an area within the game world that is created exclusively for the player and his group, and other players may not enter the same instance while the player is within in it. There are multiple instances at any one time, and while one may be able to enter an instance by oneself, it usually takes a group of anywhere from 5 to 40 players to complete an instance of corresponding difficulty to the players’ level.

Completing these instances (or raids as the larger instances are known by) seems to have a two-fold objective. One is of course interacting with group mates in a social manner, because everyone has a role to play within the instance, the other is to gain items that the player can use on his character, collectively known as "loot". This can include armour, weapons, and recipes to make potions, or tokens that can be traded with other NPCs for loot. Players can also gain experience points (XP) to level up, as well as reputation with various NPC groups in the game which allow them to purchase even more loot.

In PVP areas, players can play against other players in battlegrounds (which are like instances, although in this case one groups with players from one's own faction to combat other players from another faction), arena (same as battlegrounds, but smaller and with slightly more restrictions) or World PVP, which involves a fighting other players from another faction within the game world itself. The objective of PVP play is similar, kill and receive loot for your efforts.

Accessing the World of Warcraft

Technically, gaining access to the game is not difficult for players who reside in the United States, Europe, Australia or Singapore, as one simply needs to purchase a copy of the game from a store, provide valid address and credit details, have both a computer and an internet connection (this need not be broadband, but is preferable), install the game and start playing.

I had been putting off buying the game for a long time because although I was an avid gamer, I had wanted to spend time setting out areas of access before starting to participate in the game. One thing that accelerated my entry into the gaming world was the presence of a gatekeeper, whom I met out of coincidence in an entirely different, and offline setting.

In my spare time, I photograph weddings, and usually attempt to interact as much as I can with the bridal couple, as well as their friends. One because it makes my job easier when people are more relaxed around me, and two is that I can talk to them as part of my research into ethnic Chinese weddings in Singapore. One such wedding involved a

bride who was playing WoW, and her friends who attended the wedding and were helping out were also seriously involved in the game. When they discovered that I was interested in trying out the game, they encouraged me to join in and provided details on which server in the game I should join. One of the groomsmen at the wedding was the leader of the Guild² that they were part of, and thus was able to promise me an assured place in what looked to be a tribe even before I had joined the game.

Hence I bought a copy, logged on and started playing. In the initial stages, I was unsure of how to communicate with other players using the text chat window, and didn't understand the difference between "saying" – which meant that anything I typed could be seen by players in the nearby vicinity, and "whispering" – which meant that only the player I was typing to could read it. I did not understand the gameplay mechanics, despite having played similar games in the past, and because I was a on free 10-day trial account (which came with the game, and which I thought was a decent way to avoid the subscription fees for the first 10 days), I was unable to receive in-game mail or interact with various aspects of the game. To put it in a nutshell, I was confused, mildly intimidated and wandered the game by myself for the first week, frequently losing battles and dying at the hands of random monsters.

Joining the Guild

It was after that week, that I sent an email (not in-game, a normal email) to the bride, who then connected me with the Guild Master. Once I logged in and managed to find them online, I received an in-game invite to join the guild, and was then introduced to the next kind of chatting – the guild chat channels. It was here that I made my first gaff, where I uttered someone's real name in the guild chat channel, who quickly told me (privately) that since many of the guildmates (that's what they universally known as in the game) do not know each other in Real Life (a term to mean their offline existences), they preferred to communicate using their in-game callsigns.

As the game progressed, the guild took it upon themselves to initiate me in the ways of the game, showing me different controls, teaching me game etiquette, providing me with

² A group of players who collectively come under a name and structured social formation. I will elaborate more on this when I map out the various levels of social intimacy in the game

equipment and potions, and even teleporting me to various areas of the game world that I was unable to access at my level. The guild also practiced the system of “bussing”, which involves a very high-level character taking low-level characters through low-level dungeons, effectively allowing these low level characters to gain loot, complete quests and level up much more easily.

At the time of writing, there are 70 levels in which a player may work through in the game, starting at level 1 and ending at level 70. The higher the level, the more powerful the player and the better loot / gear the player can use. One may expect to be bussed through instances for the first 40 to 50 levels, after which one is then expected to find their own way through the dungeons in preparation for the more challenging aspects of the game at level 70. I could go on about the leveling process, but neither time, nor the scope of this paper will permit me to do so. What I want to focus on here were the various social formations I encountered as I was leveling up, and how we might consider them in the light of methodological issues.

Four Different Types of Interaction

From my interactions with players, both in the game world as well as in the guild, I was able to map out three levels of social interaction that actors engage in and form when playing the game. These levels are not necessarily distinct, and some guilds may be less cohesive than the lower levels that I am mapping out. But I propose that in order to begin an ethnography one has to start somewhere, and by working out the different levels that actors are interacting at, we might then be able to define certain boundaries of study.

The Individual's Social World – The Friend's List

The Friend's list is a separate window in the game that allows the player to see who is and is not in-game at that point of time. This is similar to the instant messaging list that would be more familiar to non-gamers. These friends may be added at any point of time, players would normally add another player to their list if they have had a good experience interacting with the player through the trade of loot, services or if they had run a good instance together.

On one level, this list is very personal and unstable. I have added over 20 to 30 different players to the game, and have forged lasting friendships with some, even though I have never met them in an offline situation. At the same time, I have had good runs with some players, added them to the list, but subsequently have never interacted with them again. Also, no two friend's list are the same, and trying to define a boundary to form a tribe as such would prove to be very difficult for the researcher who wishes to study the online gaming virtual community.

There is also an issue of ethics. Most interaction between friends becomes one to one, and the conversation is not privy to anyone else (except for Blizzard, which retains a right to monitor). To use an offline analogy, it is akin to bringing someone into a room for a conversation or interview about a topic, and thus any data gathered here by the researcher will require explicit consent from the player.

The Pick-Up Group – Temporary Cohesiveness, but not all the time

The PUG is a (usually) random assortment of players who come together temporarily to run an instance or complete a quest that requires more than one player, or to group in battlegrounds to compete against other players of the opposing faction. From a perspective of it having potential to be studied as a tribe, the PUG is hit and miss. On the one hand, it is an excellent way of understanding how people react to each other in the absence of face to face communication, and while under duress. The title of this paper, LFG BRD PST are acronyms that stand for Looking For Group (which means one is trying to join a group) Blackrock Depths (an instance in the game) Please Send Tell (which means to whisper the person making this call to ask to join the group), and is an example of a call out by a player who is looking to join a PUG.

The other problem with taking a PUG as a tribe is that it never lasts for very long. Players remain within the PUG and interact on party chat only for as long as they are running the instance, and rarely keep in contact after the instance is over, unless they add each other to their respective Friend's List. This means that the PUG does not really provide a stable environment for extended research, although a study of various PUGs

forming, collapsing or working together might prove to be an interesting way to study the game.

The Game World

The game world is the server that the player has chosen to exist and play in. Because of the appeal of the game, players are split into different servers, each the same as the other, but players cannot move with free will between servers, and each specific character is largely confined to a single server. Within this server players can interact with each other (as I have shown) and it is possible to use server-wide chat channels, very similar to a very large chatroom. In fact, many players spend a lot of time doing nothing but chatting and not partaking in other aspects of the game.

The game world is interesting from the point of view of it being a giant graphical chat room, and researchers who have spent time looking into the dynamics of a chatroom will find synergies between that and the game world. Another advantage to the game world is the public-facing nature of the game. There are issues of privacy if someone types in the “General” or “Trade” chat channel, as these can be read by anyone with access to the channel. Even more so, there are at times when players use the “Yell” command, which appears in red text in the chatbox, in an effort to make known their thoughts or requests to as many people as possible.

But at the same time, the strength of the game world is also its problem. Because it functions so much like a chatroom or marketplace, it presents less of a novel aspect to research than other situations in the game where players are interacting by playing together and supporting (or not supporting each other). Hence, while the game world with its well defined physical boundary in the guise of the server can prove to be useful for some researchers, it may prove less than optimal in the case of researchers looking for a virtual tribe³.

Guilds

³ However, this analysis is limited to PVE servers and not PVP servers, where the entire game world is a large battleground

Guilds are the communal backbone of the game, and are comprised who players who organize themselves as a group to work together to take on quests, instances and challenges. The Guild system is technically built into the game, where players have to sign a charter in the game to create a guild. Once this guild is formed, players will have an additional guild name displayed under their own username in the game graphics, and will be able to wear a guild tabard, which they can design by themselves. Oftentimes, new guilds will advertise for members, touting the tabard, and offers of assistance in difficult aspects of the game.

As I mentioned in my description of accessing the game, the guild became a very important aspect in my understanding the game and progressing within it so that I could examine all aspects of the social interaction that took place within the game. Guilds also provide the researcher with a bounded social formation within a larger gaming world, and one might be able to consider a guild as very much a tribe, with their own identity (visual, social and textual) and in that they exist in contrast with other guilds. The guild also has ranks, with a Guild Master, Guild Officers and ranks ranging from senior members to initiates. After six months in the game, I have been placed as a junior member within the guild, although in terms of day to day interactions there is no difference between guild master and initiate, and ranks are only pulled during disputes of misbehavior on the part of a member.

It is thus the guild that potentially provides the researcher with the most stable and fertile area to conduct an ethnography, in conjunction with interacting with other players from outside the guild. However, it should be noted that not all guilds are functional or as helpful as the one I found myself in. Some are more relaxed, some are dysfunctional, some are extremely demanding on the player's time and require applications to be submitted detailing how committed a player is to the game, what kind of weapons and amour the player has, and how far the player has progressed in the game. Yet all these would prove interesting to someone who wishes to see how actors interact in online gaming communities, as the guild has defined its own boundaries (albeit virtual) and social identity.

Having looked at the different social formations available to researchers in the World of Warcraft, I will now consider the different methodological issues that one might face when trying to gain access into, and interact within the game.

Methodological Considerations

Access

Technical access, as I pointed out, is not difficult, as the only thing a researcher will need is a decent computer (WoW is not extremely graphics intensive, and can be played on a laptop), an internet connection and a valid credit card. What becomes difficult is to understand the game well enough and play well enough to progress to higher levels and experience different things, so as to interact meaningfully with other players. A virtual ethnography of a game like WoW, which requires a player to understand how to fight, choose the right weapons and armour, cast spells and use items can prove to be entertaining and not entirely difficult, but may prove daunting to a person who has never played before. Accessing games like these is very different than entering a chatroom or forum board and observing what actors are typing. The two different environments require different skills and time commitments.

Also, gaining access to a guild helps with gatekeepers that one might have known in an offline world, and if that is not possible then gaining access to a mature guild (with high level players who have been around for quite some time) may prove to be more difficult than my own experience. New guilds are interesting to study in their own right, as members of the guild work towards defining their own social identity and interact amongst themselves, but I find that looking for an established guild gives a researcher more to work with in terms of watching actors work together in interacting in the game world.

Role

It is impossible for one to be completely passive in WoW, i.e. to play the complete observer, unless one was only watching for conversations in the chat channels of the game world, and this would probably become a limiting factor for the researcher. To this

extent, the researcher must learn to play the game, which means choosing one of nine character classes and leveling that character up. This need to play becomes more evident when looking into PUGs because within high level instances and raids, each group member is assigned a task, whether it is to act as a shield to the rest of the group and distract the monster, or to deal damage to the monster, or to heal the rest of the group. Becoming a good player means more invitations to instances from other members and more opportunities to interact meaningfully with actors.

That said, it is also possible to interact by crafting and trading goods with players instead of running instances or quests. However, this again becomes limiting, and trade still requires a player to level up in order to gather / purchase raw materials that can be used for trade. In this sense, the researcher would most likely be required to take on a heavily participant role in the game – which, to all intents and purposes might require a fair amount of time and immersion.

Time

Time then becomes an important issue for the researcher – just how long should / must one spend in the game in order to record enough data? An offline ethnography of a social group can take months or even years for the researcher to feel he / she has recorded enough meaningful data. The same must be said for the online gaming community – in order to level from 1 to 70, a researcher would have to play the game for about 3 to 6 months, depending on the number of hours a day one spends playing. And once the player reaches 70, as I found, the relationship dynamics between researcher and tribe members change, and this requires more time and observation, especially during parts of the game called End-Game raiding, i.e. very high level instances.

Location and Actors

Whilst some might think of online gaming communities are largely homogeneous, it is possible that researchers who situate themselves on different servers will have vastly different experiences within the game. Speaking in practical terms, reasons for this might include the way players are divided according to their geographical location. By and large European players are situated on one set of servers, American, Singaporean and

Oceanic players on another server and so on. Although it is possible for a European player will be able to play on an American server if he buys the appropriate version of the game, the researcher should be aware of the pre-determined boundaries set by Blizzard, and how this might influence the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the players on the various servers available to the researcher to access.

In this sense, it validates the idea that one cannot assume a homogeneous “online gaming community”, just as much as one cannot assume a homogenous society within say, national boundaries. There are opportunities then, for researchers to locate themselves within the same game, but in different guilds, servers and time zones, and take advantage of that heterogeneity to create novel and unique data.

Limitations to the Study

As this paper charts my first 5 to 6 months conducting participant observation in WoW, I will not assume that this gives a complete picture of the game world, or the guild that I am part of. Also, as I have only spent time in one guild, which comprises actors from a similar cultural and ethnic (Chinese Singapore) background as me, my findings might be considered partial in this respect, although I have spent extensive hours participating and interacting with other players from all over the world. I believe that in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the game and the game world, it would be useful to consider interactions that occur during high level instances which occur towards the end of the game’s content (also known as end-game content). The dynamics between players may potentially change, giving further methodological implications for the researcher.

Also, I have not yet considered hybrid versions of the four different types of social interactions that I have listed, and these tend to exist more on servers that are oriented towards PVP interaction, where anyone from one faction is fair game to players from other factions. This might give rise to actors setting different rules for behavior and interaction, and would prove interesting in determining where and how the researcher might choose to situate his study.

Areas for Future Consideration

As mentioned earlier, this is a paper charting my starting journey into the game. As my game character matures and has begun interacting in end-game, I am discovering new dynamics between actors and between actors and the game. This would mean that future would focus on my continuing role in the guild, and how this affects the way I interact with guild mates and non-guild mates alike. One interesting thing I have noted so far in end-game is my status changing in terms of seniority, as a form of co-dependency emerges between me and other players, whereas at lower levels I was very much dependent on higher level players with no reciprocation expected of me.

On the topic of boundaries, it should be noted that actors do not interact solely within the game, and use other channels of communication like online forums and even meeting off-line in face to face interactions. For the researcher who is interested in how actors are organizing themselves with the advent of games such as WoW, it would be necessary to keep track of these other channels of communication, as they can provide valuable insights into the way actors view the game and how they situate themselves in the game world, the internet and the offline world at the same time.

Conclusions

In this paper I sought to give readers a general impression of the implications to conducting a virtual ethnography in online gaming communities like guilds, PUGs and other social formations within the World of Warcraft. Having mapped out four possible types of social formations, I considered how these could be used by researchers who are looking to set out pre-defined boundaries of the tribes they are hoping to study. Finally, I discussed practical challenges like issues of access, role and location. Of particular note is that of access, and the technical knowledge required of researchers who truly wish to access the game. Unlike other fields of ethnography, where one might be able to take a more passive role, the online gaming community is interactive, engaging and a jealous mistress of one's time. It is no wonder then that some players choose to give their guilds names like *No Life*.

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