A Comparison between the Interactions of a Goal-oriented Guild and a Free-form Guild in *World of Warcraft*: Methods
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Introduction

When given the choice of whether to participate in a group effort which does not promise to provide a sure benefit to the group unless enough people participate, most people choose not to participate. This usually happens when individuals think there won't be enough people contributing to make the benefit emerge. This has been talked about in economics and mathematics as "social dilemmas", and solutions to these dilemmas have usually taken a logical, mathematical point of view, attempting to prove through logical reasoning the benefits (or lack thereof) of participation. I'd like to take a learning sciences and feminist approach and suggest two ways to address social dilemmas. One way is to teach people how to reflect critically on the choices they make in everyday situations and that those choices are connected to social, economic, political, and environmental systems which span the globe. This can be done by explicitly stating what the desired outcome is so that people can meta-cognate about their own behavior in relation to the goal. Another way is to appeal to the notion of reciprocating and contributing out of *caring for other people* in addition to contributing out of understanding the traditional logical principles of why one should do so.

Both of these approaches call for understanding the roles people play in their everyday lives—understanding for the researchers *and* for the people being studied. It is only through explicit knowledge of striving for an ideal, can people critically reflect on their decisions and actions. This understanding of the self is also needed in order to see

the intricacies between the self and others in a caring relationship. Explaining social dilemmas and these new approaches to addressing them more than what I've outlined above is out of the scope of this methods paper. Suffice it to say, I am interested in looking at how to foster cooperation within a group of people, in general, and, more specifically, I want to look at how a group of game players come to value cooperation within a massively multiplayer online game.

I am particularly interested in game players because I see online games as a sandbox where social relationships and social norms build up extremely quickly. While many players are attached to their game personas and are not as apt to persona abandonment as people in online chat rooms, I do think that people tend to take more risks while playing games. I also think that players are more willing to contribute to cooperative work beyond the kind necessary to play a particular game. In other words, I think people are more willing to try out different roles while playing games, and I hope to see them striving to take on roles which value cooperation.

Object of study

I want to study the personas people take on and develop while playing games and how those players interact to show evidence of cooperation and critical reflection. I believe that a group of players can be introduced to the concept of meta-cognition and given a shared goal on which to meta-cognate—on which to continuously self-assess and examine their own behavior. In order to understand the effects of being given an explicit goal, it would be important to also look at a separate group of players who do not explicitly share the same goal. I, therefore, want to look at the differences and

similarities of in-game chat of two different groups of players with whom I will be playing the game.

The game to be used is *World of Warcraft*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). I will be a member of two different guilds in this game for which I have already secured access to. A guild is a group of players who have officially joined together. In doing so, they have access to a private guild chat channel within the game. The two guilds were chosen for their dissimilarities. One guild, for which I was a founding member, has explicitly informed all potential guild members that the guild is focused on cooperation and the sharing of resources. These potential members then play with current guild members and only get an invitation to join the guild if the current members recommend them. In this way, all members of the guild know they are expected to participate and benefit from cooperative efforts. The other guild, in contrast, has an open recruitment policy. Any players who current members encounter while playing and who are not already affiliated with a guild of their own may be invited, sometimes "out of the blue". Thus the guild members do not all share an explicit goal.

World of Warcraft features servers dedicated to role-playing as well as servers dedicated to player vs. player combat and servers with no special designation. The guilds under study are on two different role-play servers. Players on a role-play server are supposed to play "in character" in the general and other public chat channels. This means they are expected not to make references to the "real" world or to knowledge that their characters should not possess. Many players, however, do not follow these guidelines. Even so, the use of l33t sp34k and talking out of character is discouraged, and when either occurs, some players take offense. It is assumed that servers of the same type will

generally have the same kinds of players and that any difference in how the players interact will not be due to the demographics of the players.

It should be stated, that the two guilds are also of different in-game *factions*— political affiliations which determine which players can engage each other in combat. It has been proposed (mostly by Horde players) that Alliance players are more disorganized and "immature" than Horde players. This is mostly because on most servers, Alliance players outnumber Horde players at a ratio of 3 to 1, forcing Horde players to band together more and develop deeper strategy in order to compete. Unfortunately, due to access issues, it has not been possible to join a shared-goal Alliance guild. If findings do show a difference between the chat of the two guilds, future research should be

conducted with same faction guilds or guilds of different factions using similar

recruitment strategies.

Research questions

How does the chat between players of a selective, shared-goal, cooperative guild

compare to that of players of a guild which invites anyone to join without explicitly

stating a goal for the guild? How does the fact that one guild's members are dedicated to

cooperation manifest itself through chat?

Methods to be used

The data to be analyzed will be chat utterances which can range from a single

word or grunt to a short paragraph in length. The choice of this unit of analysis stems

from both the ease of capturing in-game chat through third-party software and with the assumption that most communication between members is done using chat. The study of other forms of communication, such as voice-over-IP and in-game gestures, might be valuable, but the use of chat may be ample evidence at relatively low cost.

Two different ways of looking at the text will be used. The first is a content analysis approach, categorizing words or phrases or full utterances in three fashions:

1. to get a general sense of the purpose of the guild chat utterance

2. to binary code whether the utterance was clear or confusing / ambiguous

3. to classify the formality of the chat (i.e., is it l33t sp34k or proper English?)

This last categorization scheme is relevant because of the social norms set within role-play servers.

The second method will come from an ethnographic approach of making meaning out of the chat. Do the utterances show signs of a deep understanding of the game and the social norms of the developing in-game culture? It is assumed that many of the utterances will have to be analyzed in a deeper sense so that their meaning can be made clear, especially to non-players.

Step-by-step plan

I will play the game, spending at least 10 hours a week at different times of the day and different days of the week, for at least 3 months with each guild. I will be an active member of each guild. This means I will actively contribute to cooperative strategies in the first guild and influence the guild as much as I deem appropriate in order to foster cooperation and deep thinking. In the second guild, I will be taking a passive

role, playing the game without necessarily placing the guild's benefit above my own unless asked to by another guild member.

The chat will be captured using a third-party game addon called ChatLogger. It exports in-game chat to external text files which can then be coded using the tentative scheme presented in Table 1. There are multiple chat channels within the game. The ones being captured for analysis includes those which are not automatically generated by the game regarding combat. All player created chat which I can see is being captured, and other system messages outside of combat are being captured.

I will also attempt to analyze the level of discourse as evidenced by sets of chat utterances on specific topics, focusing on strategy talk regarding best approaches to in-game problems and talk as evidence of critical reflection.

Anticipated results

It is expected that the in-game chat of the shared-goal guild will be more sophisticated than the more open guild. By sophisticated, I mean that there will be more talk about how to approach certain in-game problems, more coordination among members, more discussion about sharing resources, and more reflective chat regarding the actions guild members and other players perform in-game. In contrast, it is expected that the open recruitment policy of the other guild with no clear purpose explicitly stated will result in chat which is more *non sequiter*, less formal, and more superficial without showing a deeper understanding of the game or a direction or outlook to take in the game. Additionally, it is expected that the community formed by the guild members of the shared-goal guild will be "tighter knit", with stronger ties which will manifest through

chat which greets and welcomes members, makes references to inside jokes, etc., and supports and encourages members in their respective tasks and accomplishments.

Summary of ethical issues

There are two main ethical issues concerning this research. The first is the general human subjects research issue of informed consent and participation in a study. In the first guild, all of the guild members are told that the guild is being studied by an educational researcher before they are allowed to join. They are encouraged not to disclose personal information and not to disclose personally identifiable information. For the second guild, where I do not actively try to affect the outcome of the guild, the other guild members do not know I am doing research. They do not know that I am collecting data. I will, however, change the screen names of both guilds' members before presenting any evidence. I do think this presents minimal danger to the members of the guilds since I cannot identify who they are in off-screen life. Additionally, players agree that their communication and behavior in-game is not private according to the terms of service provided by the game publisher.

The second ethical issue arises from the role I play as an educator and an active participant in the first guild. The nature of the guild prevents some players from joining the guild if they do not exhibit cooperative and caring strategies before being invited. Some of these players are outright selfish, but most who do not get invited are not conscious of their own behaviors as being or not being cooperative. The educator in me wants to take the time to help them learn cooperative strategies and help them socialize. This desire to be inclusive is in direct conflict with the guild's community building

standards, but the guild is right in defining a community as both who is included *and* who is excluded. This issue is complicated, and I have written about this in more detail which I will submit upon request.

Schedule

Game playing has already been started and the guilds have already been identified. With approval from human subjects, I will collect data for 6 months, or 2 academic quarters. Analysis of the data and writing a paper will make up a final quarter. The estimated budget is for one RA position for a full academic year plus the cost of the software and subscription to the game service ($50 + $15 per month).

Possible publications include the Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA) conference proceedings and presentation on various games research related websites including the author's personal website.

Table 1

Date / Time	Utterance (examples)	Purpose	Clear?	Formal?	Notes
Time1	Hi!	Greetings or goodbyes	Yes	Yes	
Time2	I could use that sword…	Loot negotiation	Yes	Yes	Many items are rare and specially suited to certain game characters
Time3	sap 1 pb I think we should flank them.	Combat or quest strategy	Yes	No Yes	A lot of combat messages are abbreviated. I'm also interested in pre-combat strateguy.
Time4	Go left.	Commands	Yes	Yes	
Time5	oom	Combat information	Yes	No	
Time6	Should I have been nicer to that guy?	Self-reflection	Yes	Yes	Evidence of assessing personal behavior, esp in relation to cooperation.
Time7	Well, that sword benefits a rogue most, so we should have let a rogue have it.	Guild-reflection	Yes	Yes	Evidence of assessing behavior of the guild, esp in relation to cooperation.
Time8	I think you were feared when we fought those guys.	Game-reflection	Yes	Yes	Making sense of what goes on in the game including the emergent social norms.
Time9	wtb mana pos	Chat with non-guildmates	Yes	No	How the guild members represent the guild through talk to non-guild members.