A Content Analysis of Interviews with Players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Play Games (MMORPGs): Motivating Factors and the Impact on Relationships

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Abstract. This paper explores the intrapersonal and interpersonal motivations involved in the playing of MMORPGs, and the impacts of gaming on online and offline relationships. Twenty-one participants completed an online synchronous interview in which they discussed their personal experiences of playing MMORPGs. An online survey was then developed to further explore the findings of the interviews and this was completed by 52 participants. A content-analysis of the interview transcripts showed that interpersonal factors (such as social communication and group cohesion) were the strongest motivators for game-playing, supporting previous research [1]. The interview data also showed that there tended to be conflict, rather than integration, between online and offline relationships, however the questionnaire data showed the opposite. This was a small-scale pilot study and a further larger study is planned which will investigate whether Social Identity Theory can be used to explain players' perceptions of group and personal identity.

Keywords: Content Analysis, MMORPGs, Social Psychology, Motivation, Relationships, Social Identity Theory.

1 Introduction

Millions of people worldwide are spending a large part of their leisure time interacting with others within Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Play Games (MMORPGs). There are 11 million monthly subscribers to World of Warcraft (WoW) alone [2]. This article focuses on MMORPGs, rather than other video games which do not have an online and social element. This introduction will first identify some of the key features of MMORPGs and will then review issues that psychologists have researched, relating to the two key themes of this paper: motivation and the impact of gaming on relationships.

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1.1 Key Features of MMORPGs

MMORPGs originated from earlier pen and paper role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons [3], which evolved into online Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) like LambdaMOO. MUDs were text-based fantasy environments where users socialised and explored the environment through simple commands. As technology has advanced, interaction now uses colourful 3D graphical interfaces. The game is set in a virtual world which changes and evolves as the user progresses, or 'levels up' their character [4]. Despite the advanced graphics, computer-mediated communication between users remains an important part of participation in these games. Indeed, it has been suggested that the success of World of Warcraft is due to the social contact through graphical and textual communication with others. Some researchers [4] propose that a high quality of social interaction is essential to complete various complex goals, e.g. through textual dialogue boxes or verbally via a microphone. The demographic features of MMORPG players appear to be consistent across a number of studies. Recent research [5] using a large sample (n=912) identified the demographics as: 70% of players were male and 29% were female; the average age of players was 24 years old and comprised of mostly students (47%), followed by those involved in jobs relating to the IT industry (11%). The mean number of hours played per week was 23 hours and 4% of gamers played for over 60 hours per week.

1.2 Motivation for Playing MMORPGs

There has been very little research investigating intrapersonal and interpersonal motivations to play MMORPGs. Interpersonal factors include those which relate to gaining respect from others and the desire to communicate with others, while intrapersonal factors refer to the individual being motivated by gaining a sense of personal control, gaining rewards or to enhance mood. The rewards within the game and the sense of belonging to a group of like-minded players are achieved through the selection of avatars and the joining of guilds. Avatars are a personal representation of the way players would like to be perceived in the game, usually consisting of a character and class [6]. In WoW, the character (such as elf, dwarf or human) and class (such as warrior or priest) provide different psychological or physical attributes (e.g. healing or attacking), giving the player a sense of belonging to the character. With different roles users will 'level up', where completing a task will lead to a reward and a new task. These rewards improve a character by giving them new armour or a weapon and as the user increases their characters' level that too gives new possibilities and allows the character to become wealthier and stronger. Once players attain a higher-level, they are encouraged to work together to complete 'instances', which can only be completed with a group of people. Usually, players will also join 'guilds' which are a self-selected grouping; in one study [7], 73% of 1836 participants were part of a guild. Researchers [8] have found that many strategies are used which enhance cohesion, such as detailed plans to motivate group members and encourage group loyalty, and strategies to deal with inter-group conflict by enhancing intra-group cohesion.

Recent work [1] highlights the role of social factors in game design, however there is very little work examining motivational factors as perceived by game-players themselves. For example, a study [3] which collected data over eight months with

automated "bots" produced detailed data on WoW usage, however although the authors discuss why and how players remain committed to this game, much of this is inferred as they did not ask players themselves. It has been proposed by others [9] that the interactions among players become the key motivation to continue playing games. These researchers found that interpersonal motivations were based on the actual role-play activities, e.g. the fighting, bonding, flirting and exploration of personal and cultural differences.

There are varied findings regarding intrapersonal motivations. While [10] found that users enjoyed playing computer games, because it gave them a sense of personal control and helped self-esteem by gaining respect from others, in contrast, [4] found that game-players did not seek to improve self-confidence within the game.

1.3 The Impact of Gaming on Online and Offline Interaction

Many researchers view cyberspace in a somewhat polarised way; as a world that is different to the 'real' world, where the dividing line seems clear and there is an obvious differentiation between online and offline communication, relationships and behaviours. For example, [9] propose that because communication is via a fantasy-based animated character, it sets interaction apart from the way we communicate in the "real" world. However, others [11] highlight examples where players interact in many ways that blur or cross-over the distinction. For example, players exchange virtual objects through a system of trade inside the game, but they also sell game currency and objects through online auctions and distribute information about the game on Web sites and fora outside its boundaries. Therefore, as in the real world, commercial interests and individual differences are involved in MMORPGs in various ways.

It is clear that online games have become a significant component of the social lives and leisure activities of young people and researchers have investigated both the positive and negative effects that video games can have on players' lives and relationships. For example, [12] found that quality of life could be enhanced with recreational game-playing, but that heavy usage would degrade quality of life. Also, [4] believe that MMORPGs are the preferred form of social entertainment for many and if they were not available, users would socialise online (e.g. chat rooms or IM) rather than socialise face-to-face. Also, there are many positive effects of game playing on offline behaviour. When researchers [1] interviewed players to map out the social dynamics of guilds, they found that players used the game to extend real-life relationships, meet new people and to form new relationships.

Other research has shown conflict between online and offline relationships. For example, [13] states one of the key consequences of excessive video game playing is time loss and that the time spent playing was causing conflict in a persons' life through neglecting face-to-face relationships. Similarly, [14] highlights problems with work, friendships and relationships. The negative impacts of excessive gaming has been related to addiction by [15], who has developed criteria from the work on other addictions which he applied to online-game addiction. A key reason why MMORPGs might be more addictive than other video games is the high levels of communication required, and also the synchronicity of communication (e.g. the mixture of messenger services, chat rooms, forums and online gaming that keep the user active). For some

users, online communication has been shown to become more important than face-to-face communication and this has led to difficulty with face-to-face relationships [16] and facing friends outside the virtual world [17].

In summary, two research questions will be explored: What are the motivating factors for continuing to play MMORPGs? and How does playing MMORPGs impact upon relationships?.

2 Methodology

There were two stages to the research: online interviews and an online survey. Requests for participants were posted on a variety of gaming chat rooms and therefore the samples were opportunistic and participants were self-selected. Twenty-one participants completed a synchronous semi-structured interview via MSN Messenger and the transcripts were stored (with permission) for content analysis. Questions and prompts allowed participants to openly discuss their personal experiences and views regarding their motivations to play and continue playing MMORPGs and whether game-playing affected offline life and relationships. An example of the questions asked is, What are your main reasons for playing the game?. The second stage involved an online survey containing 13 questions, which was used to follow-up findings from the interviews. The questionnaire was developed using Surveymonkey.com and a link to this was distributed to the same gaming chat-rooms that had been used to obtain interviewees. Fifty two participants completed the questionnaire. Questions asked players to consider different scenarios regarding friendships within-games and outside of games and to indicate their agreement with specific motivating factors to play. An example survey question is, Are your main friends within the game or outside of the game?.

A form was issued to all participants giving details of the study and requesting informed consent. At the end of each study, participants were welcomed to ask or e-mail questions and were debriefed. This study conformed to the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines [18] for internet-mediated research: informed consent was gained, participants could withdraw at any point and debriefing was provided. Also, participant details and data were protected; they remained anonymous, secure and were not distributed to third parties.

3 Results

3.1 Biographical Details

Participants within the interview sample were all male, however the questionnaire sample was made up of 77% male and 23% female players. The sample was made up of participants from 16 nationalities, with the highest group of participants being British (48%), and 74% of the sample British, American or Canadian. Ages ranged from 18 to 34, and the mean age was 22 in both interview and questionnaire. In the interviews, there were nine respondents in each age group 15-20 and 21-25, while in the questionnaire study the 15-20 age group was the most frequently indicated (n=22), with 17 participants aged 21-25 and seven over 25 years of age. The analysis showed

that 62% of the sample were students, 10% were unemployed and 24% in IT-related employment.

The mean average total playing time was 1612 hours, with the majority (ten) respondents having played World of Warcraft between 1000 – 2000 hours. There were some outliers with one person playing between 3000-3500 hours and the other 5000-5500 hours. The majority of participants in both samples played between 1 to 10 hours per week.

3.2 Motivating Factors

Responses from the interviews were reviewed by two researchers. The first researcher produced an initial set of seven categories, representing different forms of motivation and each category was assigned a colour and highlighted on the interview transcripts. The second researcher independently rated the statements and judged three of the categories to be similar to other categories and therefore these were combined to form four distinct categories. The final agreed categories were:

Category 1: intrapersonal positive, e.g. mood modification, personal achievement.
Category 2: intrapersonal negative, e.g. to continue to play to avoid feelings of loss.
Category 3: interpersonal negative, e.g. conflict or taking over other offline activities.
Category 4: interpersonal positive, e.g. enhanced social interaction.

A total of 77 statements were allocated to these four categories. The majority of statements (n=41) related to players being motivated by enhanced social relationships and maintaining and developing new connections (category 4). The second highest group of motivating factors (n=21) related to negative interpersonal factors. The categories representing intrapersonal motivations attracted the lowest frequencies, with only nine statements relating to personal achievement within the game (category 1) and six statements relating to negative motivation (category 2). Examples from each category are now provided to illustrate these.

Interpersonal Positive. Nearly 25% of statements within this category referred to either the enhanced quality or quantity of communication as a motivating reason for continuing to play MMORPGs. For example, P4 stated that: “it's enjoyable to communicate and socialise with others whilst playing the game”. However, the guilds and team behaviour were referred to by the majority (75%) of the 41 statements in this category, for example:

- P4: “you're part of a team and you don't want to let others down”
- P11: “it was not the actual game I felt that was pushing me to do this, more the feel of letting the other 25 (used to be 40) people down if I didn't turn up”
- P16: “You have 10-40 people all working together performing sometimes very complicated and well co-ordinated manoeuvres in order to finish raid dungeons”
- P10: “People are relying on you and no matter what circumstances may arise even in life you feel guilty by saying you would tie yourself into something and not follow through”
- P9: “The community aspect is 90% of the reason I play WoW”

To further investigate these findings, question 7 of the survey asked participants why they play MMORPGs. The results found that 58% (30/52) participants played for the community aspect.

Interpersonal Negative. Thirty three percent of the statements in this category (7/21) related game playing to the negative experiences of offline interpersonal contact, for example:

- P15: "If I can find something good to do, like go to the cinema or go bowling for instance, I've got no quarrels with cutting down my hours on any game, but i need something interesting to replace it in order to do this"
- P13: "I didn't find it hard to stop but I felt quite bored doing nothing with my time whilst trying to find a substitute"

To follow this up, a question in the survey asked participants what they would do with their time if they were not playing MMORPGs. The results showed that the highest frequency (n=19) was 'play other games', followed by 'watch television' (n=14) and 'socialise' (n=13). With small frequencies for the remaining categories, 'work' (n=4), 'sleep' (n=3), 'music' (n=3), 'sport' (n=5) and 'other' (n=9).

Intrapersonal: Positive and Negative Comments. Positive emotions of feeling personally rewarded by the game were mentioned, for example, P4 stated: "once you start a quest, I felt excited to finish it". The negative emotions related to the avoidance of withdrawal symptoms, for example: "I really couldn't see anything else to do with my time, this made me irritable".

3.3 The Impact of Playing MMORPGs on Relationships

Analysis of the interaction between offline and online relationships showed some conflict. Many participants in the interview prioritised their online friends and it was clear that there was a strain on offline friendships and relationships, as the following comments illustrate:

- P5: "I think I cancelled on friends several times because I had a raid organised with members of my guild"
- P6: "left large groups of friends on an evening out to go home and play WoW"
- P7: "on relationship, missed the best parts of it because of the game"
- P12: "get worried that the commitments or people I am either missing or altering at the last minute will suffer"

However, integration was also shown by one participant, who joined WoW because his face-to-face friends were playing. Also, other examples showed that the game crossed-over into relationships outside of playing, for example:

- P6: "All my real life friends were playing it at the time and I felt left out so I thought I'd give it a try"
- P9: "I converse with a lot of 'real life friends' about playing WoW"
- P15: "conversing with my friends about it. Talking about what we did and will do"
- P20: "I often talk to other guild members in the real world about the game"

In the follow-up questionnaire, participants were asked whether they believed their main friends to be inside the game or outside the game. In contrast to the interview data, the majority of participants indicated their main friends to be outside the game (40/52). A scenario was then presented involving a choice between agreeing to help their guild or to go out with friends outside the game; 41 participants chose their offline friends over their guild.

4 Discussion

4.1 Motivating Factors

The data showed that participants socialised as they talked about the game and what they were going to do next. This supports previous findings [7] that highlight the importance of tactical discussions as a place where most of a player's important relationships are formed and which 'frame a player's social experience in the game'. Comments indicated that players felt obliged to help their friends and felt their absence would let their team down, supporting research [4] that the game revolves around working as a team. Indeed, in the interviews there was evidence to suggest that group cohesion was so strong that some participants reported staying in the game for the sake of the group, rather than individual motivations. The findings supported previous research [3] that identified the way that players acquired real-life social skills from gaming environments. For example, three participants in this study noted an enhancement in offline social behaviour, as a result of their game-play. Further work is being planned to test whether Social Identity Theory [19] can be used to explain intrapersonal perception of group identity and interpersonal perception of group cohesion.

4.2 The Impact of Playing MMORPGs on Work and Relationships

The questionnaire data indicated that many participants would neglect their friends to play the game or they would prioritise time with their guild, over face-to-face social groups. When asked what they would be doing if they didn't have access to MMORPGs, the most popular activity was to play other games, followed by watching TV then face-to-face socialising. Therefore, this data provide some support for the view [13] that game playing is replacing watching television as a recreational activity. However, data from the interview indicate that if game-playing were withdrawn it would be replaced by social interaction, rather than watching television/other game-playing and face-to-face friends were preferred over guild members. This contradiction will be further investigated in the next study and possibly may be related to the social psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance [11].

4.3 Future Research

The results of this pilot study produce an interesting account of motivations for playing MMORPGs, however it is based on a small sample size and therefore the generalisability of the findings is limited. Further research is planned using a larger and more representative sample. The findings from this study supported the demographics

of players identified in previous research [5] in terms of average age of players, occupation and gender, showing that game-play in this study remains dominated by adolescent boys and young adult males [10]. However, there are a growing proportion of females playing games and further research will examine gender differences. For example, the finding that males tended to seek dominant activities within games, compared to women who preferred relationship-building [20] could be explored. This could further be related to the choice of avatars adopted by individuals, to identify the importance of social and cultural norms, e.g. in the choice of sociable or isolated characters, and competitive or cooperative tasks. Also, the relationship between motivation and personality will be explored, to test for example, whether introverts rather than extroverts may play for superiority and higher status, and whether locus of control is related to intrapersonal or interpersonal motivations to play. In summary, this pilot study will be used to inform methodological and theoretical directions for further research.

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