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ABSTRACT

Oldenburg's (1999) theory of Third Place was used as a lens to determine whether World of Warcraft (WoW), a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG), acts as a virtual third place where users go to engage in informal social interaction. Based on Shields' (2003) seminal study on virtuality, WoW is examined as a liminality that exists between the physical realm and what exists in essence. Virtual communities exist on the threshold between the tangible and the iconic, creating a sort of liminality that allows us to feel them without actually having them present in a purely physical sense. Similarly, Third Places are examined as existing on the threshold between formal public life and private life. The study found that while WoW shares many aspects with Oldenburg's Third Place, the theory as designed by the author does not stretch to accommodate the peculiarities of virtual places and the communities that exist within.

Keywords

Third Place, Guilds, Presence, Virtuality, World of Warcraft, Online Community.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, online space has been getting more attention as a tool for community-building. As computers and technology have grown more advanced, online landscapes have grown immensely. One such online landscape is World of Warcraft (WoW). WoW is considered a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, or an MMORPG. As of October, 2007, there were approximately 10 million players (Gibson, 2008). In November of 2008, WoW released new content to its online world, known as an expansion, in which a record-breaking amount of units were sold world-wide in 24 hours, adding over 1 million new accounts to total 11 million players (Thorsen, 2008). Because of its sheer size, WoW has begun to attract researchers from fields as diverse as sociology to epidemiology because it provides a virtual space in which human behavior can be studied both anonymously and on a grand scale (Vastag, 2007).

WoW is an online paid experience in which thousands of players interact within a three dimensional virtual landscape. These players are separated into "realms," which hold several thousand "toons" or avatars. Avatars are the life-blood of Azeroth (the world in which users interact). Through these digital representations of self, people can interact with a fully functional virtual reality which mimics an actual world (Boone, 2008). There are different continents, oceans and ecosystems. There are even different cultures and languages which one can choose to learn and be a part of (Pirius, 2007; Squire, 2006). Animals attack each other and the player, there are warring nations, it can be cloudy or sunny, it can rain or snow, and there is night and day. If you arrive in the unending plains of The Barrens, a savannah located in the continent of Kalimdor, at just the right time, you can witness a breathtaking sunset and then the onset of the dusky fog rolling in from the nearby mountains.

Of course, the primary feature of WoW is not the virtual world itself; it is the communities that form within this virtual world. As an online community, WoW players are a distinct group of people with shared interests, backgrounds, geographical area or culture interacting through the use of computer mediated communication, or CMC. In this case, the geography would be the game itself, and the culture and shared interests are inherently linked to the playing of the game (Pirius, 2007). Specifically, within WoW, players unite to form guilds, or groups of like-minded players that use teamwork to advance through tougher areas of the world (Gibson, 2008). Technically, guilds are groups of real people working through avatars to accomplish goals and form relationships within the boundaries of WoW's virtual realm. Some theorists such as Robert Putnam and Neil Postman argue that the internet and the so-called "virtual existence" that WoW affords users is destructive to communities and social capital. Instead of building relationships, culture and communities, virtual communities foster isolation instead of combating it, and at best offer a pale imitation of community when compared to the "real" thing (see Postman, 1993; Putnam, 2001). Others point out that WoW, specifically, does allow players to create and maintain a "heroic identity" through their avatars, but does not necessarily free them from performing real-world social roles and succumbing to real-world social pressures within the virtual world (Boone, 2008).

Yet, recent research into guild play suggests that players do form, and feel, a unique sense of community when playing online. Perhaps one of the reasons that WoW is so popular is that it forces its players to be social. Guilds are absolutely necessary for progression in the game and being a member of an elite guild can command respect on the server that the user plays on (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & More, 2007a). The fact that WoW is goal-based and that these goals almost always require one to be a participating member in a group of players makes WoW an inherently social game. Guilds often gravitate towards small, close knit communities of players because of the trust and teamwork needed to progress through increasingly difficult goals (Ducheneaut, et al. 2007a). Furthermore, guilds, like individual players, must operate within the written codes of the game giving guild members a sort of virtual heritage through which social learning is enabled (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee & Nickell, 2006). The rules of Azeroth are different from the rules of everyday life, with the most obvious difference being the absence of fantasy elements such as magic or video game elements such as avatar customization. For this reason, WoW players engaging in social activities through guild life operate within a unique set of norms determined largely, but not exclusively, by the rules of WoW.

What is puzzling about WoW is whether it acts as a meeting place, or whether it is simply an imitation of a meeting place. Putnam states that a lack of informal social interaction, the

lifeblood of community, has been decreased by media use (Putnam, 2001). Ray Oldenburg believes that crucial informal meeting places which foster sociability and civic involvement are on the decline as well (1999). This paper explores the concept that virtual spaces, such as the environment WoW provides users, can be considered one of Oldenburg's informal meeting grounds.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND THIRD PLACES

Oldenburg states that when "the good citizens of a community find places to spend pleasurable hours with one another for no specific reason, there is purpose to such association" (1999). By this he means that society and communities are held together by a general sense of social well-being, or the ability of the community to meet and mingle on an informal basis. This informal social life is aided by what he calls third places, or places that are neither home nor work. Third Places are public meeting spaces that act as neutral ground, providing an informal atmosphere ripe for casual socializing.

Third Places combat societal tendencies toward isolation and loneliness (Oldenburg, 1999). In order to avoid separation from a formal public life, people will seek out a neutral space that fosters interaction, engagement, and a sense of community to relieve and reduce isolation. Oldenburg states that people seek third places on neutral ground to relieve stress and decrease isolation; people seek inclusion to connect with others who share similar interests and to relieve stress and decrease isolation; community is bolstered by informal sorting areas that facilitate grouping on neutral ground based on common interests; and community is developed through access to neutral ground, which fosters a sense of inclusion.

Oldenburg states that third places can be defined not by where they are, but by what they do, and that they tend to have a set of common characteristics (1999; Soukup, 2006). Third Places are neutral ground in that they act as "places where people may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, in which all feel at home and comfortable" (Oldenburg, 1999). Third Places also act as social sorters and levelers, a leveler being anything "which reduces men to equality" and a sorter being a place that ignites broad-scale association, which leads to "socio-metrics," or people with similar interests finding one another and creating lasting relationships (Oldenburg, 1999; Soukup, 2006). Oldenburg states that Third Places are accessible, that they are affordable and do not place an emphasis on "table turning." They keep long hours and are near to residential and business areas (1999). In part because of accessibility, third places create regular customers. Regulars create a community atmosphere and inspire conversation in others. They know the staff, the place and move about it as if it were their own. The main activity in a third place is conversation and social exchange, which includes lively talk about general topics, which is "scintillating, colorful, and engaging" which is then also often a companion to the sorting and leveling processes (Oldenburg, 1999). Finally, Third Places keep a low profile that constitutes a sense of "homeliness," which means they create an atmosphere that places emphasis on the people who inhabit the location and not the location itself (Oldenburg, 1999). This playful atmosphere inspires wit and lighthearted conversation, which fosters inclusiveness.

Oldenburg argues that culturally, the U.S. lacks even the ability to defend the necessary public places that are so vital to a healthy community and social life (1999). American culture stresses individuality and independent action, an ideology that isn't necessarily bad, but that must be tempered by the realization that it takes grease to keep the wheels of society turning. This

grease is a sense of communal well-being, which is aided by informal public meeting places. However, there are few of these left in America. Oldenburg points out that the third place's capacity to serve the community often is not reliant upon the ability of a nation "to understand its virtues" (1999). This means that third places can be anywhere, including somewhere as fundamental as a virtual, online community based in the internet.

Yet we must ask ourselves, what is a virtual world? Rob Shields explains that the word means something "in essence" or "essentially so" (2003). The root is 'virtue' which comes from the Latin root *virtus* meaning strength or power (Shields, 2003). The idea of a virtue comes from the Platonic forms; they are precisely not real because they are iconic: they exist outside of the objective realm and delve deep into the subjective world, where humanity sculpts and molds reality to a fine point that tips the spearhead of symbolic thought.

One could argue that this amorphous virtuality, in which identity can be formed and reformed to suit the user's needs, is a form of "role-playing," and is not conducive to deep personal relationships. The counter-argument would be that we role-play every day. We are different people at work and at home, with our children and our spouses. We change our behavior to adapt to the environment in which we reside. In the case of reality, the critics of CMC have a tangibility bias, the idea that if it is not existent in space-time then it cannot exist in a way which makes it useful. However, if this is so, then why is it that so many people fall in love and have successful marriages through using the Internet? In the case of humanity, reality is to some degree purely subjective, and just because we cannot see something, that does not mean it is not there. Therefore it is not far-fetched to assume that if people feel they are experiencing community on the internet, the chances are that it is a community.

Virtual communities exist on the threshold between the tangible and the iconic, creating a sort of liminality which allows us to feel them without actually having them present in a purely physical sense. Reducing internet communities to a real/unreal binary is naive because of the very nature of virtuality--it does exist in *essence.* Shields points out that reality for psychologists and physiologists concerns an object that can be identified and verified by firsthand observers who perceive it (2003). Computer files, tiny bits of virtual information made visual through a graphic user interface, can be tracked and seen by the computer users. Because they are abstractions interpreted and converted by a cybernetic system, does that make any less real? Anyone who has read a .pdf file instead of picking up the actual document recognizes that the *text* is the same despite the fact that the *form* is different.

Virtual worlds and those who inhabit them are a different form of community than, say, the local bridge club. Yet it could be argued that it is textually the same: people interacting with each other. Guild research by Williams, et al. suggests that many small guilds are formed by family or a small group of close friends, and then expand to include other players of similar interests (2006). Guilds, large and small, either thrive or fail based on participation, trust and sociability.

Ducheneaut, Moore and Nickell point out that one can compare a game's virtual spaces to Oldenburg's ideal real-life social spaces (2007b). Ducheneaut, et al. use another MMORPG, Star Wars Galaxies (SWG), to examine how virtual environments can promote sociability, a key concept in Oldenburg's theory, however, because of similarities between all MMORPGs the observations made can be carried across virtual spaces. One key concept is the interrelated nature of player professions. In SWG, players can have professions that their avatars can learn to make money and advance skill levels. These professions often require items from other professions to

advance, thus forcing players to nurture viable relationships with other players in order to progress (Ducheneaut, et al. 2007b). Similarly, in WoW, players' professions often depend on other players. Enchanters, who specialize in item enhancement, require goods from blacksmiths, who specialize in metallurgical. These professions also require players to foster relationships amongst one another in order to progress in the game. This, along with guild creation and management, led Ducheneaut, et al. and Williams, et al. to the conclusion that third-place communities could exist within online environments by promoting sociability, although in an inherently different way than their real-life counterparts (2007b; 2006). Nardi and Harris also found that collaborative play effected people's enjoyment of the game, resulting in the formation of tight-knit groups (2006).

Soukup states that online environments can offer up highly satisfying social interactions despite the lack of face-to-face contact (2006). This is in context with the idea that third places can reduce stress and isolation by providing meaningful social connection. He also suggests that research into CMC and community implies that, if operated correctly, online communities may actually help to reverse alienation and disconnectedness that is associated with the post-industrial world (Soukup, 2006).

Within WoW, through digital representations of self, people may be able to experience the perceived presence of others. WoW's avatars, called "toons" by players, can interact with a fully functional virtual reality which mimics an actual world. They are essentially animated cells with set parameters of movements and emotes (emotions that can be articulated by the toon) that are controlled by the player. There are varying degrees of realism in different MMORPGs, but WoW leans towards the more cartoon-like animations. This is interesting, as it may result in the game's enormous popularity and its uncanny ability to spawn close-knit communities.

Scott McCloud states that cartoons and comics are really just icons--meaning any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea (1993). Words (which he defines as non-pictorial icons) are fixed in meaning and abstract. Their appearance does not affect their meaning because they represent invisible ideas and have no resemblance to the idea, which they represent (i.e. a drawing of an eye and the word "eye" represent the same thing, just in different ways). Pictures have a more fluid sense of meaning. They can vary in how accurately they depict "real life" (McCloud, 1993). McCloud sets up a continuum in which pictorial icons exist on a scale of "realism" with a photograph as the most real and the cartoon as the least real. Yet he poses the question, "Why would anyone, young or old, respond to a cartoon as much as or more than a realistic image?" (McCloud, 1993). He points out that our culture is enthralled with the stripped-down reality of the cartoon. McCloud states that cartoons are essentially a way to focus our attention on an idea. In other words, when we look at a picture it can only be what it represents. A portrait of George Washington can only be George Washington. However, a cartoon, as it further divests itself from reality, can become anything in our minds. McCloud claims that abstract cartoons (a smiley face, for example) become less accurate and began to come closer to the true *iconic* image. He states, "Humans are a self-centered race, we see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist and we make the world over in our image" (McCloud, 1993). McCloud explains: humans have a very basic sense of self, but it is vague and cloudy, encompassing "...a sense of shape...a sense of general arrangement" (1993). Thus, when we see a photograph or portrait, we see another person. But when we enter into the iconic world of the cartoon, we see *ourselves*. McCloud claims that "...the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled" (1993). Cartoons are universal; they are an empty shell that we can inhabit. McCloud states that we don't just watch cartoons; we literally *become* them (1993).

McCloud cites Marshall McLuhan as the originator of the "non-visual awareness" theory. The things people use in everyday life are actually extensions of ourselves, it's a human evolutionary trick: humans weren't born with claws, fur or feathers so we simply engineer them to augment ourselves. Cartoons are similar; they can embody our selves in a way that allows the viewer to insert oneself into the story, into the plot, literally to turn oneself into the *archetypal image* becoming the *icon*. McCloud states that by de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical, cartoons lend themselves to the world of the concept (1993).

Thus, the cartoon literally *becomes* the icon, archetype and theme and players become their toon. Cartoons and avatars are archetypes in the purest Jungian sense: they do not just tap our subconscious, they are our subconscious. Since it is the player and not the game giving concepts shape and meaning, the iconography of the avatar/toon is universal. They rely on the player to assign it meaning, thus acting as a vehicle for a separate, but no less real, reality.

In a sense, an avatar is an extension of one's self, a tool players use to digitally embody themselves, enabling them to enter and interact with an immersive virtual world. These avatars are self-contained vehicles, which are digital ambassadors to the virtual. In short, the avatars inhabiting WoW are people with personalities, hopes, dreams and intellects. A social tool in the game allows WoW players to keep track of the people, friends or foes, that a user encounters, and the forum and chat servers allow lasting bonds to form from what is initially a goal-oriented relationship. Also, players can modify their avatars to suit certain needs or personality traits (Boone, 2008). Players can create different races which have innate skills (such as healing talents or increased weapon damage) and classes that can specialize in different tasks. Each class is integrated into a group system, so players always find themselves "needed" by certain groups. Factions also provide players ways to embody themselves through the game: the Alliance is an order-driven faction with beneficent intent while the Horde is more rebellious and chaos-centered. With every choice players make they take one step further to creating their own unique presence in WoW's digital environment (Gibson, 2008; Boone, 2008). It is the fact that people are actually present through their avatars, and that Blizzard encourages interaction through social-use interface tools in this digital world, that may aid in fostering a unique online community in WoW that perhaps meets Oldenburg's criteria for a Third Place.

Yet the best way to determine whether players use WoW and similar MMORPGs to combat societal tendencies toward isolation and loneliness and seek out a neutral space that fosters interaction, engagement, and a sense of community in order to relieve and reduce isolation-related stress is to play with them and ask them. In this paper, the researcher will discuss findings after spending a year playing World of Warcraft and attempt to determine whether WoW counts as a third place.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research was to find whether people viewed WoW as a "place" that they could actually go to experience the informal social life that Oldenbug states third place stimulates.

Also, the researcher sought to find whether WoW combats societal tendencies towards isolation and loneliness assuming that, in order to avoid separation from a formal public life, people will seek out a neutral space which fosters interaction, engagement and a sense of community to relieve and reduce isolation.

And finally, the research attempts to find whether serious WoW players used the immersive digital landscape to relieve stress and decrease isolation, seek inclusion to connect with others that share similar interests. Also, the research attempted to find if players viewed WoW as neutral ground and how the politics of WoW either bolstered or decreased community.

METHOD

In order to better understand what made WoW so popular the researcher decided not just to look at the game, but interact with it. According to James P. Spradley, ethnography is less about studying people and places and more about learning them. Spradley states that when a ethnographer fully participates in an activity and does what others do in order to "become" one of the group (1980). Therefore, the research involved active participation to the fullest extent while still maintaining an academic standpoint. On the most basic level, researcher became what is known as "leet" in gamer terminology: a high-level player who engaged in end-game raiding, a time-consuming and intense group activity often involving 10-25 players working towards a goal simultaneously. This allowed the researcher to better understand the norms and worldview of those players who, to the casual observer, might be labeled as "addicts".

Methods for Collecting Data

The overall study length was one year. The amount of time spent per week was 20-30 hours. This large block of time is considered mandatory to be among an elite gaming circle. The researcher raided with and befriended a guild, running a high-level instance at least two nights a week for about four hours. This is added on top of the amount of time played in order to level the avatar from one to the maximum level 70 (4 months at an average of 25 hours a week).

Interviews were conducted with open ended questions on the guild chat. The researcher would then whisper or PM (private message) guild members who responded. Over 30 interviews were conducted with a set of 15 questions centered around why users continued to play WoW and what their likes and dislikes were about the game. The players screen names and real-life names were not recorded. They were referred to as Players 1-30. Also, once every login session the researcher would ask a similar open ended question about WoW on the global trade chat, eliciting responses from players all over the server. These responses were then monitored by screenshots and transcriptions.

Chat monitoring was conducted in order to better understand social interaction via observation of the general guild chat as well as global chat. The researcher learned the slang, etiquette and unspoken laws of social interaction with players on the server and made according notes/screenshots when interesting or pertinent subjects came up in either guild or global chat.

Voice chatting was used in order to gain knowledge of how players interact through oral communication in real-time. The researcher engaged in voice-chatting with other players, often while accomplishing an objective alongside them. The researcher did this to understand how they worked together and how vocal messages were transmitted and received and how these differentiated from text-based communication.

Realm Statistics Monitoring- using a third-party software, known as Census Plus, the researcher was able to monitor what races, classes, and factions were on at any given point in the game. By denoting the popularity of certain races and classes, the researcher believed he could better understand the social structures which build up around them.

Forum monitoring was conducted. Forums act as a very important aspect of the meta-game, or the culture surrounding the game (Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008). Players of different factions and races with come together in the forums and converse is text chatting and bulletin boards. By examining relevant posts the researcher sought to gain a sense of how players interact outside the game

The researcher took extensive notes tracking both interaction with the environment and the community. Also, a separate diary was kept tracking the researcher's own personal relations with both may avatar and the community itself.

RESULTS

Out of 30 interviews, 25 respondents stated that they played WoW to reduce stress. Twenty-nine stated that they experienced the presence of others when they logged on and interacted in Azeroth. Eighteen said Azeroth felt like a second home and all players interviewed stated that playing WoW was an enjoyable experience. However, only 10 said the game was relaxing.

Player 6, a 63 year-old female who declined to give any other information, stated that she viewed her guild as an extended family and coming home to see them was a relief after the stresses of work.

Player 28, a 19 year-old female from the Southeastern U.S., says she logs on and plays WoW at least 12 hours a week.

"There are people who play a lot more," she said. "My boyfriends logs (plays) at least 30 hours a week."

She comes to WoW in order to get away from the tediousness of college life. "IRL I'm really straightforward. I guess that's why I like my character so much. I'm a rogue, see? A type of thief that is sort of a jester. Not in the comedy kind of way, but he's sort of a trickster. I sneak up behind people and do huge amounts of damage...but if they find me out I die quickly. I suppose its the opposite of my IRL personality. That's why I like it."

As with many in WoW she gender-bends, meaning she is a female playing a male toon. On an interesting note, she find that sexism exists even in Azeroth.

"I find I have more freedom as a male toon. People treated me differently when they thought I was a girl. They assumed I needed help or didn't know how to play."

The fact that she felt undermined shows that presence is strong even online, and can play a part in the everyday social situations players face. Despite social hardships that persist from IRL into WoW, she continues to visit Azeroth.

"People who don't play don't understand," she said. "There are real people, so you have a sense of social interaction, but the game is also goal-driven and has a point--to become a bad-ass. You have a real sense of place, too. For example, I'm an herbalist. I have to know where flowers grow, and different species have different climates. I also have to remember the safe paths to get there."

Player 1, a 30 year-old male in Northern Virginia, plays WoW in order to de-stress after work. "I go on to see my friends and talk. Sometimes we quest but sometimes we just jump on Vent [Ventrilo, a live voice-chat software] and talk," he said. "Sometimes its just refreshing to be accepted for who you are."

Like Player 28, he feels the sense of presence very keenly, even when it hurts. "It hurts when you get left out of guild activities, or find out they have replaced you for an instance [group activity]. It's funny how upset you can get, but then you just have remind yourself: it's a game. It just doesn't seem like that's true most of the time," he said. "It's only when you log off for the night that it all gets put into perspective."

Player 3, a 22 year old male from the Midwestern U.S. who has two young children said he allows his daughter to sit in his lap while he plays. He said she seems to enjoy watching her father play WoW more than she likes watching TV.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I definitely think she understands. She knows that if she hits the keyboard the character on the screen moves. She's only two." He demonstrates by letting her take the keyboard while dueling (a friendly test of strength between two allies). His character, a giant bear, begins to spin around wildly then suddenly stops and looks directly towards the researcher's avatar, then begins to leap around excitedly.

"That was her," he said. "She understands someone else is there."

According to Subrahmanyam and Green, chat and CMC are often used to strengthen already existing relationships (2008). Similar results were collected by monitoring chat responses to open-ended questions such as "Why do we play WoW?" which were sent to the global chat network. The serious responses ranged from relaxation, interaction and friendship to simply, "...because it's fun". Often times these question ignited controversy between parents who played yet limited their children's time on the game, individuals saying it destroyed their IRL social life and individuals saying that WoW interaction was the same as IRL minus the physicality. The researcher would often engage in debates which cropped up on the channel, which works as a sort of Poor Richards Almanac of Azeroth. The global chat channel on WoW is meant for trade only, a sort of global marketplace for selling materials, items and help. Yet Blizzard's intent of having the channel solely for trade failed. Global trade chat became something much bigger: a thriving conversation channel which encompassed flirting, jokes, advice and even wedding announcements. Often people use it to find groups and guilds or form clubs with others who share similar interests. Also, warnings are made about untrustworthy players, loan sharks and price gougers who monopolize auction house goods. Often times these warnings result is a community blacklist of certain players. Through observations, it was found that global chat works as the mouthpiece for the community and is the starting point for all players to become engrossed and engaged with others.

From observing voice-chat and the role it plays in WoW communities, the researcher learned that there is essentially a "business channel" for the game through the use of real-time chatting between large groups of people, much like a very large telephone conversation. However, unlike the trade channels, in the upper levels of the game voice chat is often used to relay instantaneous orders to raid members. As with text-based chatting, voice chat hosts a number of slang words and acronyms that can only be understood by those who have played the game for an extended period of time. Since voice-chatting is often used for serious business (such as raiding) younger players will often sit in to listen to the raids, which allows them to learn the lingo as well as the etiquette for chatting in a raid party, both during the action and during the downtime between large engagements with enemies. Therefore voice-chat servers act as socialization chambers for younger players, who learn the ropes for raiding by listening to "elder" players (the terms young and old to denote the avatar's level, not necessarily the players biological age). This

helps to form a teacher/student aspect of WoW, which is important for building bonds and passing on traditions that affect everything from the smallest guild to the enormity of the game itself.

Realm statistics monitoring did not have the desired effect of giving an idea as to how factions affected community. While it did show what players, classes, factions and races were logged onto the game at any given time, it did not provide any information which might have helped to determine existing aspects of third place which may or may not be apparent through statistical means. However, it did give a base point for constructing interview questions and approaching field notes. Knowing how many players exist on the server chosen (Kael'Thas; 2,400 players) gave an idea of how much data should be collected to get close to a general consensus based on players' opinions.

Forum monitoring is perhaps the most important methodology for this type of research, not only does it give a general "feel" for the server itself (rivalries, friendships, disciplinary actions and personal news) it is also static, and therefore easier to refer to than the chat channels or voice-chat servers, which all move very rapidly. Some studies, such as Steinkuehler & Duncan's (2008) study on scientific language and processes on WoW forums used content analyses to examine trends in communication. What they found was that most forum discussion results in "social knowledge construction" (Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008). On the most basic level, the forum acts as Greek chorus of WoW. It provides back-story to current feuds between guilds and often-intense discussions about the lore of the game itself. It is the main mouthpiece of the meta-game, or the culture that surrounds the game, and therefore does not always involved discussions that are intrinsic to WoW's mechanics. Players come here and can log onto a host of forums which interest them based on their class, race, faction or server. There, within each forum they may participate in a community of others that hold the same interest. This allows them to pick and choose communities that they wish to take part in and also introduces them to a host of people they would otherwise not know because of server and/or factions divisions. It is not uncommon for players to form romances over the WoW forums, and in this yearlong study, the announcement of over 15 weddings that were WoW-related was observed. Also, community events are organized over the forums from the mundane to the more personal, such as memorial services for players who passed away. It is the focal point of the meta-game, and because it is static, players often take the time to go more in-depth on subjects and discussions in the forum than in the fast-moving world chat.

DISCUSSION

It is the rudimentary instinct to socially engage that fuels WoW. Even the youngest of children understand. When one places a dot on a mirror and then set a baby in front of it so the dot looks like it is on the infant's nose, the infant touches its own face after a certain age. This is a psychological test to determine self-awareness. People understand themselves because they understand presence. People's understanding is self-reflexive: people see others because they see themselves. In this way, people must also come to understand that the Internet is filled with other people, whether they are psychically present is irrelevant as long as they are there in essence.

Therefore, through the results of this research, it is the researcher's belief that WoW is an actual place in the net, a geographical location filled with people, culture and community. The next step is to say that since WoW is neither someone's home or work, then it could be classified as a liminal place between private and public life where people go in order to engage in casual social interaction. The results of the chat monitoring and interviews suggest that people use WoW

to reduce isolation, and while many said that playing the game itself could be stressful, the community surrounding the play is reassuring and comforting. If one is a member of a guild or a forum group then a regular cast of characters surrounds one. Even operating alone on a server one gets to know players who sign on frequently, which gives a sense of regularity to encounters.

WoW is considered to be accessible and neutral. No one person owns WoW and no one person is forced to play host. Unlike other MMORPGS, WoW discourages buying and owning property such as houses and shops. This frees people from the duties of keeping up their own personal spaces and promotes recreation and socialization. Also, WoW, similar to other third places such as coffee houses, is monetarily feasible for a variety people.

Another argument against WoW being accessible is that older generations may not be familiar with computers and may have trouble learning how to play. Blizzard has installed a tutorial that solves this problem, giving step-by-step instruction to any who may be unfamiliar with computers. Several members in the guild observed over 50 years of age, dispelling the myth that online gaming is only "for the young."

WoW also acts as a social leveler in the sense that everyone who plays has a chance to become "leet." While the game is skill-based, a person's advancement relies largely on how well the player can work with others. Everyone begins as a level one and every ends as a level 80, should the player choose to progress through the entire game. Guilds are formed in order to help players achieve their goal in a supportive environment. While some guilds are larger and better respected than others, the interaction between guilds in the same faction is largely congenial. Also, WoW does not restrict based on age, sex or athleticism. Anyone can learn how to play and since the world is entered through a computer terminal, it does require a high degree of mobility. Since the person's character is solely constructed in game they are essentially beginning as a blank slate: as soon as they start they have the same social status and ability to advance as anyone else in the game. This, its believed, helps to account for the games popularity as a "hang-out." Many times players will log on solely in order to chat, give advice and help other players. Since everyone is on a level playing field, there is no reason to feel social anxiety when in Azeroth. Interviews support this, with 27 players stating that part of the attraction to WoW is the feeling of inclusion regardless of "who one is."

WoW also can work as a social sorter. Character creation, class, race and faction are one method that Blizzard uses to help to sort players. Many interviewees stated that they pick their character based on their personality. Classes have different abilities (healer, warrior, magic-user) and often players will choose to coincide with their interest and personality. Also, the factions cater to different personalities (rebel/conservative, chaos/order, etc.). A player's class determines their role in the group as well as their behavior during raids, battles and even every day questing. Some classes hold more responsibility while others are simply fun to play. All of these factors contribute to the sorting process where people meet based on common needs and interests. Guilds often recruit based on players' interests (there are guilds for gay/lesbian players, female players, families, singles and hosts of other interests). The forums also help sort and form smaller communities within WoW. Forum users can join discussions about a variety of topics that interest them and friend users with similar ideas. They can also form friendly rivalries based on guild or faction selection, adding a competitive nature to the interactions.

Since WoW is a unique environment, it also breeds unique conversations. A linguist could spend years researching the origins and uses of WoW-based slang. Also, since the game is largely based on communication through text, many players choose to adopt a more "public

address" form rhetoric similar to that of ancient Greece and Rome. The use of wit and formal address is common in chat channels and forum posts. The conversations are often lively and filled with new slang and humorous jargon. Also, knowledge was consistently produced and disseminated through the forums (Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008). Players prank each other or post photos with funny captions. There is even a growing community of WoW comics artists who draw humorous Sunday paper-style strips based on their experiences in Azeroth. Above all, almost all exchanges are light-hearted and malicious rhetoric is policed by the community and therefore nearly non-existent.

While these results intimate that WoW shares many aspects with Oldenburg's theory, the theory does not stretch to accommodate the intricacies and difficulties presented by computer mediated communication. Most importantly, Third Places theoretically foster civic engagement and a buildup of social capital among those who frequent it. More study isneed to asses WoW and other MMORPG's ability to promote civic engagement. Also, whether or not social capital exists in virtual worlds in it current definition is still being debated.

While it is intriguing to apply currently existing social theories to virtual worlds, more research and theory-building must be conducted in the area to produce new or modified definitions which suit the intrinsic differences between virtual and IRL interaction.

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