

My Guild, My People: Role of Guilds in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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ABSTRACT

Massively Multiplayer Online Games continue to grow and attract more users. The social aspect of MMOs differentiates them from single person games, increase user loyalty and often result in users spending increasing amounts of time in these virtual environments. We examine World of Warcraft guilds and identify three components of group identity: affective, behavioral and cognitive components. We present the results of our online survey indicating that the affective component, users liking each other and enjoying their interaction with each other is the strongest component of group identity. The result is significant in understanding user behavior and loyalty in MMOs.

Keywords

Group Identity, Digital Identity, Virtual Environments, Games, MMOs

1. INTRODUCTION

Millions of people are playing Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs). But the word “play” does not sufficiently capture the range of user activities. The average MMO player spends 22 hours/week in this virtual world, equivalent to a half-time job and more time consuming than most activities. While most MMOs are fantasy based games and the user focus is often on finishing quests or finding the hidden treasure, the users’ interaction with other people is part of what makes the virtual world so engaging. MMOs are not just a form of entertainment, they are also becoming the primary socialization space for many people.

MMOs share many similarities with other games including shooting, killing, exploring, winning and losing. What differentiates MMOs is the large number of users and the persistent world the users share with each other. Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006) argue that the role of social activities have been over-estimate and the social side of MMOs are exhibited much more through players having an audience, social presence and spectacle while playing the game mostly by themselves.

MMOs, at least well-designed MMOs, rely on the collective intelligence of the users. As such, MMOs are continuous learning and teaching grounds. While it is possible to play an MMO similar to a single person game, it is much more common to request information about locations and strategies as well as listening on people’s chatter on the chat channels and picking up bits and pieces of information that might come in handy later.

Players often respond to requests for information and help out other characters that they will most likely never interact with again. Regardless of whether this helpfulness is an attempt to show of ones knowledge to others or due to altruism, the effect among players is an environment where knowledge is easily shared.

As Koster (2005) put it “It’s a COMMUNITY. Not a game” (emphasis from the original text). As communities, they have their own rules, conventions and inside jokes. Listening to other players chatter, asking for help, learning and sharing information allows one to become more integrated with this community. The community binds the user. Moving from one game to another offering similar gameplay becomes difficult as the user will have to leave one community behind and learn about the new one. A good example of user reluctance was experienced in World of Warcraft (WoW) in 2006 when Blizzard opened new servers and tried to move users from crowded servers to the new servers. Although the game world was completely identical, and performance of the new server would make gameplay smoother, users were reluctant to move all by themselves. When moves happened it was groups of people that have agreed to the move, and at times whole guilds, moving servers together.

User groups, often called guilds, tribes or clans, are a smaller piece of the community made up of users with shared goals. As permanent, or semi-permanent, grouping guilds play a special role for the player; it allows players to interact more intimately with a smaller part of the community. In time, guilds can even develop their own rules and conventions differentiating them further from other guilds and the rest of the players. Temporary groupings also play an important role as these groups allow the members of different guilds to share conventions, exchange information, and help shape opinions about other guilds. The interaction in these temporary groupings, much more than interaction with the guild, defines the community.

Bartle (1996) proposed achievers, socializers, explorers, and killers as the four types of players with distinct motivations. Yee (2006) expanded these categories by examining achievement, manipulation, relationship, immersion and escapism as distinct motivators for players. The social aspect, expressed as socializing or by establishing relationships or through other acts, is what differentiates MMOs from other games. Group identity is defined as members’ positive attitudes toward their group (Hinkle, Taylor, Fox-Cardamone & Crook, 1989). The three components of group identity are cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. We use WoW as a stereotypical, and

the most successful, example of an MMO and examine the degree cognitive, affective and behavioural components contribute towards user's attachment to their guilds.

2. FORMING A GUILD

Why do people choose to form guilds in World of Warcraft? Despite the fact that social aspect is a major component of what makes MMOs fun and engaging, WoW provides minimal support for users to organize themselves into long term groups. Communication is limited to text and a number of predefined animations. The list of friends make it possible to quickly check if any of one's friends are online, but the only way to communicate with them is by whispering them individually. While the "general" channel that allows all users to communicate with each other and the "trade" channel have continuous chatter that provide background noise, unless the user is actively trading or in need of specific local knowledge the conversations on these channels remains irrelevant. The friends list lacks the ability to record notes about the person, does not show when the user was last online or where they are in the virtual world if they are online, does not allow sending of messages to offline users and provides no facilities for scheduling future activities. In fact, in its current implementation the friends list serves only a reminder of characters the user has interacted with.

For a new WoW player, the simple friends list is often sufficient. Most activities can be completed individually. The number of other characters the user encounters is limited and encounters relatively short. At the end game stage, the situation is reversed. Quests can no longer be completed individually. To get the better prizes and loots require coordination between five, ten, twenty, twenty-five or forty people. Encounters can extend up to five or six hour sessions. Planning and coordination is essential to succeed at this level. In fact, despite the lack of support WoW provides for long term user groups, the designers are well-aware that having in-game friends, having a group affiliation within the game increases loyalty and reduces the chances that a user will quit the game, even long after the game has become a chore rather than entertainment.

While succeeding at end game is often the primary reason, users also form guilds to more easily keep in touch with friends, to extend the story and lore of WoW, to teach and learn from others and to explore different aspects of the game. WoW's support for guilds is limited to a dedicated guild chat channel and a roster of guild members, so guilds will often use web pages, forums, voice over IP, signup sheets for group activities and other methods to coordinate activities. In WoW, a character can only belong to a single guild which further add to the importance of choosing the right guild.

Guild leaders often describe the experience of running a guild similar to having a second job or running a medium size company with minimal resources. While most guilds focus on endgame instances, or are building their membership to attempt these instances, guilds will often describe themselves as social guilds or raiding guilds as their primary focus. Higher end guilds will often have raiding requirements, requiring characters to join certain number of scheduled guild runs to be eligible to remain in the guild. Attrition from the guild is unpreventable as people's level of commitment to the game changes or members

find a guild that matches them better and move, so guilds often have to be recruiting to maintain their size.

Duchenaud et. al. (2006) found that 66% of characters belonged to a guild and 90% of characters over level 43 belonged to a guild. The maximum level has increased from 60 to 70 since that study, but we would expect to find similar numbers, if not even higher numbers due to the longer time spent levelling, in the current game. Duchenaud et. al. also found that players in guilds spend more time in game than others and group more often as well. Seay, Jerome, Lee and Kraut (2004) found that on average players were only "somewhat committed" to their guild. A result supported by the large churn rate found by Duchenaud et. al.

One explanation for the churn rate and the low level of commitment is that while it is very easy to start a guild, maintaining a guild with over 100 characters requires constant time and effort. A guild leader trying to grow the membership of his or her guild will often advertise openly and invite anybody who is willing. Only established guilds have the luxury of a careful screening process and even then they might choose to admit members freely on a probationary status. The cost of admitting a probationary member is minimal as the probationary member will not be given access to any of the guild resources or allowed to join in on the major instances or if allowed to join in not allowed to obtain loot during those instances. Consequently, while a smaller core characters in the guild remain closely connected and committed to the guild, a much larger loosely connected group will remain at the edge of the guild, resulting in the higher churn rates and low levels of commitment found in the studies.

Understanding what ties a person to a guild can have serious impact on how MMOs are designed. In the next section we describe components of group identity and demonstrate how different components get expressed in the context of guilds.

3. THREE-FACTOR MODEL OF GROUP IDENTIFICATION

We adopt Henry, Arrow & Carini (1999)'s model of group identity with cognitive, behavioural and affective components. Group identity as a research area has been explored from various perspectives focusing on different aspects, but attempts to measure it have been limited. Henry et. al. (1999) note:

Social identity literature emphasizes the cognitive aspect—awareness of a group and self-categorization of oneself as a member (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). The cohesion literature emphasizes the affective aspect, focusing on interpersonal attraction (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Piper, Marrache, Lacroix, Richardsen, & Jones, 1983; Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984). The common fate literature emphasizes the behavioral aspect by pointing to the importance of interdependence (Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Chen, 1996).

	Mean	StdDev
Affective		
1. I would prefer to be in a different guild (R)	5.8	1.76
4. Members of this guild like one another	6.0	1.19
7. I enjoy interacting with the members of this guild	6.3	1.08
10. I don't like many of the other people in this guild (R)	6.1	1.48
Behavioral		
2. In this guild, members don't have to rely on one another (R)	4.6	1.74
5. All members need to contribute to achieve the guild's goals	5.5	1.57
8. This guild accomplishes things that no single member could achieve	5.6	1.73
11. In this guild, members do not need to cooperate to complete guild tasks (R)	5.6	1.63
Cognitive		
3. I think of this guild as part of who I am	4.6	1.92
6. I see myself as quite different from other members of the guild (R)	4.5	1.74
9. I don't think of this guild as part of who I am (R)	5.0	2.01
12. I see myself as quite similar to other members of the guild	4.7	1.60

Note: (R) indicates a reverse scored item. Items have been grouped for ease of inspection but are distributed in the instrument as indicated by item numbers.
1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Mostly Disagree, 3=Somewhat Disagree,4=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 5=Somewhat Agree, 6=Mostly Agree, Strongly Agree

Figure 1: Survey questions on group identity

We expect group identity for WoW players to be exhibited at multiple levels. First, there is the intimate group of friends, possibly friends from real life and other games, who the player groups with. Next, there are the temporary groupings with other players. While a long term relationship may not be established in these temporary groupings, an average user playing 22 hours/week is likely to run into other characters at the same level over time. In fact, school, jobs and other regular commitments can result in regular playing times which make the grouping more likely. The guild the user belongs, and 90% of high level characters would be in a guild, represents the larger formal group that forms players identity. The server community, customs, conventions and habits established in that particular server provides the general background for the guild. At critical times, such as server wide protests or world events, the player interacts with this larger community. Outside the game, official and unofficial forums, web pages and wikis form an even larger community that the user is a part of.

We focus on guild level group identity since 1) joining and remaining in a guild is a voluntary act demonstrating some level of commitment, 2) guilds indicate formal structures and 3) while guild sizes may vary since guild size never exceeds 300, limit imposed by WoW, it is a relatively small group that a player can get to know over time.

3.1 Affective Source

Cohesion has been defined as the set of forces that act on members to remain in the group. The two forces are 1) the group's attractiveness and 2) the group's ability to help members achieve its goals.

While group identification is meaningful at an individual level, cohesion exists at the group level. Henry, Arrow & Carini (1999) argue that interpersonal attraction is a source of group identification and group identification develops as a result of affective bonds among group members. Consequently, development of group cohesion and group identification overlap. Group members that are attracted to each other, enjoy

each other's company, would spend more time together and achieve goals together. The collaboration towards shared goals leads to group interdependence.

We would guess that the initial core group that forms the guild has strong affective component and members have high affinity for each other. As the guild grows and new members join in, we would expect the attraction to new members and attraction among the newer members to not be as strong. Of course, over time the new members could also form affinity groups with each other and with the original group. Ducheneaut et. al (1999) have found that guilds tend to have a core group of people who play longer together and large majority of guilds have a single core group. We would expect results to these questions to vary based on whether the player was a core guild member or not.

3.2 Behavioral Source

The common fate of the group as well as interdependence within the group leads to coordinating activities within the group towards common goals. The set of questions developed by Henry, Arrow & Carini (1999) are shown in Figure 1.

Since the primary goal of for forming guilds is to achieve goals that an uncoordinated group cannot achieve, we would expect the behavioural component of the group identity with the guild to be high. In particular, instances that require 25 or 40 people cannot be completed with a pick-up group necessitating guilds. The loot that drops from mobs in the instances would benefit a specific person in the group, usually determined by complex algorithms weighing character's contribution to the group. This makes it necessary to go back to the same instance week after week, so group members who have not obtained the valuable item will get their chance.

3.3 Cognitive Source

The cognitive component of group identity is the response to self identity, categorization of oneself as a member of a specific group. The instrument developed and tested by Henry, Arrow & Carini (1999) use the questions in Figure 1 to determine the strength of the cognitive component as a part of a person's

group identity. Questions marked with (R) are reverse scored. The questions for each component is spread out in the survey. The question numbers indicate their ordering.

In the context of social identity, people might identify themselves as Hispanic, as a mother or through their job title. In the context of MMOs, social categories do not exist. Guild membership is both voluntary and does not allow multiple memberships in the same way social categories allow belonging to multiple groups. Furthermore, the class of the character, such as warrior, mage, priest, etc., determines role in groups and playing style. For a player, important class-specific information on how to best play his character would come from users playing that character whether they are in the guild or not which would be group cross-cutting guild boundaries. However, playing multiple characters would dilute this affinity with one's class as the player can no longer think of himself or herself as belonging to a single class. The race, gender and the profession of a character are rather insignificant to gameplay. Race and gender and looks of the character are set at the very beginning of the game and cannot be changed. It provides visual differences that are often ignored as they do not indicate abilities or talents. A character will have two professions and is free to change professions at any time. While a character who earns gold through collecting rare recipes and selling the crafted artefacts may identify with that profession, the identification is much more with the set of recipes he or she has collected.

When group identity is taken as guild identity, we would expect the cognitive component to be low.

4. METHOD

A brief description of the goals and a link to the survey was posted to four official WoW forums, general, off-topic, guild recruitment and welcome forums, during March and April 2007 to contact participants. Participants who chose to click on the survey link received a warning to indicate they were leaving the official WoW pages. Participants were asked to answer the survey questions based on their main character. The first section of the survey asked questions regarding demographics, realm (server) name and approximate amount of time played. The second section of the survey asked social identification questions, shown below in Figure 1, on a 7-point scale. In the third part of the survey participants were given the option to enter freeform comments and include email addresses if they wanted to receive a report on the survey results.

5. RESULTS

A total of 106 participants, 76.4% male and 23.6% female, with a mean age of 24.9 (std = 8.8) completed the survey. 54.7% of the participants' main character was in alliance, 45.3% in horde.

The participants were primarily from USA (84%), followed by Canada (7.5%), Australia (3.8%) and Great Britain (2.8%). Out of the 222 realms that are available to players, players were distributed over 68 realms. 65 realms had only 1 survey participant was from that realm; 17 realms had 2 participants, 1 realm had 3 and 1 realm had 4 survey participants. Most of the survey participants were from normal realms (48%) and player-versus-player realms (41.5%) with few participants from role playing (7.5%) and role playing player versus player (2.8%) realms.

The average mean for affective component was the highest with 6.08 followed by behavioral component at 5.30 and cognitive component at 4.70 (respective standard deviations: 1.05, 1.18 and 1.35). The 95% confidence interval graph shown in Figure 2 below show that the ordering between the means for affective, behavioral and cognitive components will hold for the general population with affective as the most important component.

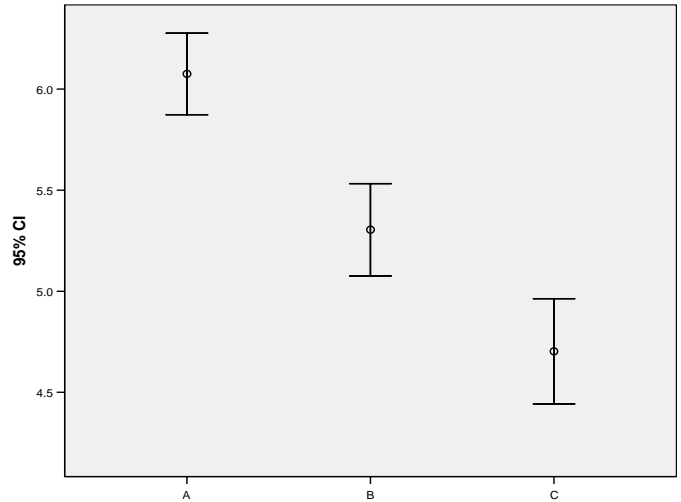


Figure 2: 95% Confidence Interval for Affective(A), Behavioral(B) and Cognitive(C) components

Looking at gender possible differences, we find that for females the mean for affective, behavioral and cognitive component is slightly higher in all categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Affective	Male	81	6.0247	1.15421	.12825
	Female	25	6.2400	.55659	.11132
Behavioral	Male	81	5.2778	1.23996	.13777
	Female	25	5.3900	1.00021	.20004
Cognitive	Male	81	4.6481	1.39742	.15527
	Female	25	4.8800	1.19269	.23854

While we do try to tease out the components of group identity, the three components are inevitably strongly linked to each other. We would be surprised to find that people in a guild would like each other (affective component) without cooperating with each other (behavioral component) or without having a sense of connection to the guild as a group (cognitive component). As expected, the affective, behavioral and cognitive components do come out as highly correlated indicating that having a high score in one without the others would not be possible.

Table 2: Correlations

		Affective	Behav.	Cognitive
Affective	Pearson Correlation	1	.297(**)	.524(**)
Behav.	Pearson Correlation	.297(**)	1	.392(**)
Cognitive	Pearson Correlation	.524(**)	.392(**)	1

**Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (1 & 2 -tailed).

While our survey results cannot establish causality among the components, or which components first attract a player to a particular guild, we have found that the affective component, liking people in the guild and enjoying interacting with them is the strongest component in terms of group identity. This adds further support for MMOs as primarily social areas to hang out, modern day street corners for teens, coffee shops for the older users, with a series of interesting side activities for shared experiences.

There are currently over 8.5 million subscribers to WoW. Our survey with 106 participants, is neither comprehensive nor can be considered authoritative in its findings. Furthermore, self-selection of participants who have decided to complete the survey, the survey being announced on the WoW forums in English could also skew the results obtained. Nevertheless, we have shown that although components of group identity are closely related to each other, we can break it down to discrete components to understand it better and the affective component or users liking each other is the most important for guilds.

6. DISCUSSION

MMOs are significant economic, social and cultural spaces. Players spend an average of 22hours/week in these spaces. The number of hours spent should not be seen as an indication of their interest in a particular MMO, but rather an indication of where their friends currently are with the MMO activities providing a backdrop. The success of WoW has been to attract many users who have previously not played MMOs into WoW by creating a very interesting backdrop, but unless the gameplay supports and enhances the social relationships among users, groups and guilds can pickup and move to the next location as easily. Understanding factors that strengthen groups is critical for designing MMOs that can maintain and grow their user base.

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