Transformation of Relationships
Within Online Roleplaying Games

Nate Gillick ⚔ Sociology ⚔ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
Dr. Jeff Erger (Faculty Advisor)

Introduction

Online games, including Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying games (MMOs) are an ever-growing part of the videogame industry. **The largest of these games, World of Warcraft, currently has a player base of over 11 million people.** These games can place hundreds, if not thousands, of players together on their own servers, which function as the self-contained worlds in which players interact. To date, little scholarly attention has been paid to how these players interact and form relationships with people they may never have met outside the game. The purpose of this research is to examine relationships within online games and examine the process of how relationships may change from instrumental to affective in nature. The processes that motivate these changes are likely to be present in situations outside games, as well.

Key Words/Concepts

Instrumental Relationship: Relationships centered on the exchange of items, and material advancement. In the context of games, players work together to get better items or more money for their characters. Players will trade with each other, or group together, as necessary to better their own in-game status.

Affective Relationship: These relationships focus on personal connections and friendships with other people. Material benefits are not a concern. In games, socializing and having fun with other players is more important than in-game advancement.

Guild: A collection of players that play together regularly. Guilds are like social clubs. World of Warcraft provides guild members a private chat channel, a group bank for the sharing and storing of items, and other benefits.

Raid: A large group of players (usually at least 10) will go into a dungeon together, to take on some of the game's toughest bosses, and also obtain some of the best available items.

Grouping: Groups of players get together to play the game as a team. Players may cooperate to explore dungeons and other player-versus-environment (PvE) content, battle in player-versus-player (PvP) arenas, and more. Their size is smaller than a raid.

Theory

The micro-level sociological framework of **Symbolic Interactionism** concerns itself with the interactions of individuals or small groups of people. This framework asserts that individuals actively create their own reality through interactions with others.

Within this framework resides **Social Identity Theory**, which asserts that people have as many different identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles (Stryker 2000). Identities are the shared social meanings that persons attribute to themselves in a role, and can be a source of motivation for action, particularly actions that result in the social confirmation of the identity (Burke 1991).

As individuals interact with a group, **Collective Identities** may develop. A collective identity can be defined as an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution (Polletta 2001). It is distinct from personal identities, though it may form a part of them (Polletta 2001). Collective identities carry with them positive feelings for the members of the group (Polletta 2001). Members of groups with a collective identity tend to view others in the group as fundamentally like themselves, and that the group is a whole entity in itself.

In the online game environment, these theories would predict that the meanings players give the game are formed through interaction with other players, and these players will form groups where they can express salient identities and have them validated by others. Over time, a group collective identity will form, as players who have spent a long time playing together will think of themselves as a collective unit.

Method

1. **Find blogs**: I searched the internet for blogs about online role-playing games, focusing on World of Warcraft, as it has the largest available player base. These blogs exist as individual narratives of play experience, and would provide the data. To be included for the research, blogs had to meet the following criteria:
   - Have existed for at least four months.
   - Maintained a minimum 2 posts a week, 8 per month.
   - Focus primarily on the author's activities in-game. Blogs that focused primarily on game details and discussing game strategy were not included.
   - Four months of each blog were taken for study, on the belief that this should be enough time to see relationship transformations take place.
2. **Ensure variety**: To make sure I had enough data, and a variety of voices, 20 different blogs were collected for the research, totaling approximately 1,100 pages of text, or 400,000 words. While some of the blog posters have played with other blog posters included in the research, a wide range of blog sites were looked at, to make sure these blogs represent a diverse group of players across multiple servers, and not one particular clique.
3. **Develop a coding scheme**: I read through several blogs to get a sense of the writing style, and what elements jumped out as important. From there, a system of codes was developed to look at the key aspects of the game, such as guilds, raiding, as well as aspects of relationships, such as trust, or drama between players.
4. **Code the data**: Using NVivo 8, the blogs were read through, with relevant passages coded for later analysis.
5. **Analysis**: NVivo 8 allowed for instances of each code to be easily isolated, or compared with other codes, for easy comparison of variables.

Analysis

Analysis of player narratives revealed three major themes:
1. **High frequency of instrumental interactions leads to development of affective relationships.**
2. **Affective relationships may possess higher salience than in-game progression.**
3. **Instrumental concerns return at a relationship's end.**

1. High frequency of instrumental interactions leads to development of affective relationships.

Analysis showed that players would often join a guild that seemed to have instrumental ambitions similar to their own, or joined because they had grouped with one of its members. Early on, these new guild members will often group with other members of the guild to get to know them better. At this stage, the focus is mostly on completing raids, quests, and various dungeons. New members wish to ingratiate themselves with other guild members by proving they can be relied upon to perform instrumental tasks successfully. This can range from adequately performing their character's role in group situations (such as healing, or damaging specific enemies), showing up on time for guild functions, displaying adequate knowledge of various areas of the game (like PvP or specific dungeons), and more. The examples below show players wanting to establish themselves as instrumentally useful.

> "It was a good night. I was actually asked to lead the Raid which I was totally comfortable with… After the run, I received several complements on the run from people so I think I gave a good accounting of myself for the new guild. The Guild Leader thought I did a very good job. I think I've established myself as a good tank and an asset to the guild. That will be very important as we move on to the 25 man raid game." (Honors)

> "I just don't want to be perceived as unreliable. Well. Maybe I am if 'reliable' means 'available no matter what' but I truly do not believe that to be the case. Still, little things stick in one's mind and I'd hate to have it said in the future that I should be excluded from some activity because I'd probably not be available no matter what I said." (Grimmtooth)

The length of this phase varies with the size of the guild joined. In smaller, more closely knit guilds, players had an easier time integrating themselves into the group than those who joined larger guilds. Once players have established themselves as useful, a higher level of instrumental trust is conferred upon them. They may now be able to receive loot earned in dungeons, or access items stored in a guild bank. The instrumental trust placed in them by other members of the guild may also be displayed by giving them items to make them even more effective in-game, as shown below:

> "Last night, the GM put the Savagery enchant on my spear without asking for anything in return. That's just how we roll in this guild." (Grimmtooth)

Instrumental trust is established before affective bonds develop. Once that trust is in place, guild members showed a higher degree of comfort gradually revealing more personal information to the people they'd spent so much time playing with. Newer members who meet guild approval may also be introduced to various guild traditions and inside jokes. For example:

> "We moved our way on to the Beast. Our new Rogue, Kippin, is tasked with being "Punted." Yay for the Puntee. (Every newcomer to UBRS is made the Puntee. Its a tradition of ours. If you haven't been Punted, you haven't really lived. You must try it.)" [Kinless]

One sign a player has fully integrated themselves into the group is when they act in accord with the standards of behavior they've learned from the guild, and wish to help newer guild members as they were helped themselves.

> "I did what I could to help out in the whisper channel, and by the time we got to the last boss she was trapping with a high degree of confidence. She accepted the input in the spirit it was given and commented that it was unusual to get advice of a helpful nature like that. Another reason I love my guild - that's how we roll in the Order of the Vorpal Bunny." (Grimmtooth)

2. Affective relationships may possess higher salience than in-game progression

As affective bonds between guild members solidify, and a sense of collective identity develops, higher salience is given to having fun with their friends, as opposed to advancing their character with better items or more money.

> "I have to say that I am getting tired of stroking the egos of raider guild wannabees in an effort to keep them from going astray. Our guild charter is front and center. If you can't read, is it my problem? Do you want to be in a group where your only worth is how many Professor Plums you bring to the table? If so, begone, I say. I prefer to play with friends, possibly adults, and not a bunch of mouth-breathing teenybopper killing machine aspirants" (Grimmtooth)

The conflict between instrumental and affective play, as well as the establishment of a collective identity, can be clearly seen above. The poster would rather play with friends (affective) than players who only care about how much damage they can deal out (instrumental). He invokes the guild charter as a defense for his position, identifying himself with the guild, and stating that the guild, in turn, agrees with his beliefs. In the quote below, the poster goes so far as to say it might be good to raid *less* (decreased instrumental play), so that his friends will continue to enjoy the game (higher salience of affective play).

> "I am worried that we will burn out the healers. Our healers, like most of the people in my guild are more than just guildmates to me. I consider them friends. I don't them to burn out on the game because I enjoy running with them. DPS and Tanks sit out raids, but our Healers have to go to nearly every single one of them." (Honors)

Strong affective relationships and the collective identity as a member of a guild can fully replace instrumental concerns as the reason players continue to invest time in a game. What started out as a game with emphasis on instrumental character progression has transformed into a social space to interact with friends.

> "I'm pretty fortunate to have such a good guild and group of friends. Without that, I don't think I would even still be playing WoW let alone be so active in the 'end game'." (Asleep at the WoW)

> "We end up talking a lot about gaming in general, WoW more specifically. That's because of our Guild. I swear, I would not be playing this game if it weren't for the people I play with. AC rocks my socks in more ways than one" (Married IRL)

When these affective bonds have been formed, it can be hard for some players to continue to play if they don't feel like they're a member of a group.

> "I really hope I get this guild nonsense sorted out soon. Right now, I don't truly feel a part of any guild community, and that has taken some of the fun out of the game for me right now." (Honors)

3. Instrumental concerns return at a relationship's end.

Social Identity Theory and Collective Identity predicts that relationships that have transformed from instrumental to affective nature will become stable and enduring, as players continue to interact in an environment that is in accordance with their identity. However, analysis showed that instrumental concerns frequently returned as a force to break apart, or at least diminish, existing affective relationships.

> "I see players that want to see the whole game being able to without having to sacrifice guild loyalty and friendship to all of progression." (Dechion)

Dechion here understands that instrumental concerns can force people apart. For many online game players, a time comes when a choice must be made between maintaining existing affective friendships, or moving on to different guilds to continue instrumental progression. The below posts show one of many instances where a guild reached this tipping point. One of the posters (Honors) decided to move on to a different guild to do more raiding, while the other (Bacon) remained in the guild.

> "Heroes isn't a "Raiding" guild, and they don't want to be. But when you try to please both sides (PvP/PVE) you may end up pleasing no one. Guilds at the end game tend to dedicate themselves to either PVE or PVP. The players spend nights where there is not a guild event working on that side of the game (running Heroics if PVE, running Battlegrounds if PVP). With trying to do both, you won't PVE enough for the PVE crowd and you won't PVP enough for the PVP crowd. …to really have success on both fronts, the guild would have to be much larger than Heroes wants to be. …I don't think Heroes wants to be that large of a guild. A guild that large loses much of the closeness and comradery that makes Heroes such a special place." (Honors)

Guild size seems to be a major factor in the debate between instrumental play and affective relationships. Smaller guilds appeared more closely knit in the analysis, but lacked the numbers of players necessary to progress through most of the end-game content. Larger guilds had better success tackling instrumental objectives, but members of those guilds often reported feeling like cogs in a machine.

> "I don't want to leave Heroes; I've made a lot of friends within the guild. There aren't a whole lot of options for me even if I decided to leave. There aren't a whole lot of guilds who accept Protection spec Paladins. I just know that I'm getting frustrated by the situation, and I'm not sure what to do about it." (Honors)

Bacon's conflict is more complicated. Not only is the conflict of instrumental play versus affective friendships present in his writing, but there is also the conflict brought on by the fact that friends he knows in real life may leave, meaning the situation would force him to choose between two sets of affective relationships.

> "Well it's official, Heroes Inc will no longer be participating in 25 man raids. Some people have left and I know itself with trying to weed out some more people. Unfortunately, some of the people that may leave are RL friends of mine. I'm going to have a tough decision on my hands here when that happens. I guess I could follow them again and try to start something guildwise again. But doing a complete 180 will take me away from the happy medium that I am used (which is a nice blend of PVP and PVE content)."

Now on the other hand, I have developed some good friendships with other people in the guild which like to play the same amount of PVP content and PVE content that I do. I am pretty sure that I may have a spot on their 10 man raids if I stay in Heroes. …if I stay in Heroes, will ZA be enough to fill my current raiding needs since we will no longer run 25 man content?" (Bacon)

Identity theory states that individuals will place themselves in groups and situations where they can express a salient identity. The theory predicts that once individuals have established themselves in a group, they will remain members as long as the identity they forge through interaction with others is validated. However, the breakup of affective relationships to pursue instrumental objectives challenges this assumption. Could exploring end-game content and having a powerful character be a more salient identity than the relationships forged within it?

Conclusion

Going into this project, I assumed that when players begin playing an online roleplaying game for the first time, the focus is mostly on making their character stronger, and relationships with other players would gradually build up over time. Consistent with identity theory, I assumed affective relationships, when formed, would remain stable for as long as players had their identities validated in interaction. Analysis thus far reveals this is often not the case.

The cycle of relationships in online roleplaying games appears similar to the arc of relationships you might expect to see in a work environment. New guild members often try to ingratiate themselves with the guild and prove themselves useful, like a new employee might at their job. In both instances, relationships with others will develop over time, through activities like group questing in games, or social drinking after work. Players can become good friends with their guild-mates like employees can become good friends with some co-workers. However, if a job comes along offering better pay or benefits, or players can find a guild promising better end-game progression, these instrumental concerns take precedence over affective relationships, and thus people will move from their current job/guild to another. People may stay in contact with friends from the old job/guild, but these relationships are diminished through less frequent contact and interaction.

In the gaming context, game design seems to be a large factor in the conflict between instrumental and affective relationships. Small guilds tend to be more tightly-knit, but are ill-equipped to handle the most challenging content in the game, which often requires a major time commitment, and larger groups of people. My analysis suggests that if end-game content were made accessible to smaller groups of players, the instrumental versus affective conflict that ends in diminished affective relationships could be significantly lessened.

Future research could expand on this work in several ways. First, this research limited itself to a four-month time span of each player's experiences. A study looking at a longer period of time may be able to show more conclusively if players eventually settle into instrumental or affective groups, or if this cycle keeps repeating. More extensive research may also be able to uncover if instrumental factors are merely the *stated* reasons players leave guilds, where affective concerns may be the actual cause. Future research could also focus more specifically on the forces (both in-game and from other interactions) that bring the instrumental vs. affective conflict to a head, helping to provide a clearer picture of the processes involved in the fundamental social phenomenon of shifting human relationships.

Sources

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