

Dissecting Group Identity in MMOs

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KEYWORDS

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

ABSTRACT

Massively Multiplayer Online Games continue to grow and attract millions of players. While it is generally agreed that the social aspect of MMOs differentiates them from other games, it remains unclear what factors of socialization attract users. We examine group identity in the context of one of the largest MMOs, World of Warcraft, explore how cognitive, behavioural and affective components are exhibited in a guild environment and contribute to a group identity.

INTRODUCTION

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) continue to grow and attract millions of players. The impact of MMOs is not just economical. With the average MMO player spending 22 hours/week in the game, MMOs are becoming an important if not the primary form of entertainment and socialization 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-estimated 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.

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 component of group identity are cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. In the next section we use WoW as an example of a successful MMO and explore its guild structure. In Section 3, we examine the components of group identity and provide examples of how

different components are exhibited. Section 7 discusses the preliminary survey we have conducted in WoW.

GUILDS IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

While forming a guild is relatively easy and only requires getting ten signatures from players, growing and maintaining a guild requires a lot of effort. Users create guilds for a variety of reasons: to keep in contact with friends, to have access to other trusted players they would like to form groups with and most often to have the critical mass to attempt some of the larger end-game instances that require up to 40 people. Guilds will often setup web pages, have forums for discussing strategies and socializing, use signup systems to decide when they will be raiding an instance and manage a guild bank to store items that might be needed later.

Ducheneaut et. al. (2006) found that 66% of characters belonged to a guild and 90% of characters over level 43 belonged to a guild. Ducheneaut 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 Ducheneaut et. al.

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.

COMPONENTS OF GROUP IDENTITY

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).

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.

COGNITIVE COMPONENT

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 below questions 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.

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| <p>Cognitive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">3. I think of this group as part of who I am6. I see myself as quite different from other members of the group (R)9. I don't think of this group as part of who I am (R)12. I see myself as quite similar to other members of the group |
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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. When group identity is taken as guild identity, we would expect the cognitive component to be low.

BEHAVIORAL COMPONENT

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 included below.

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| <p>Behavioural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">2. In this group, members don't have to rely on one another (R)5. All members need to contribute to achieve the group's goals8. This group accomplishes things that no single member could achieve11. In this group, members do not need to cooperate to complete group tasks (R) |
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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. This makes it necessary for players to go back to the same instance week after week.

AFFECTIVE COMPONENT

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. The set of questions developed by Henry, Arrow & Carini (1999) are included below.

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| <p>Affective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">1. I would prefer to be in a different group (R)4. Members of this group like one another7. I enjoy interacting with the members of this group10. I don't like many of the other people in this group (R) |
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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.

PRELIMINARY SURVEY

To test the strength of different component in guild identity, we modified the Henry, Arrow & Carini (1999) survey changing "group" to "guild" in the survey questions. 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 above, 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.

A total of 106 participants completed the survey. We found that the affective component was the highest (6.05) with participants "mostly agree" with the survey statements, followed by behavioral component (5.3) with participants "somewhat agree" and cognitive component (4.7) where participants' average response was between "neither agree nor disagree" and "somewhat agree". While the small sample size makes it difficult to make conclusive statements, affective component seems to be the primary contributor to group identity.

CONCLUSION

MMOs have attracted large number of users making them significant economic, social and cultural artefacts. Players spend an average of 22 hours/week in these environments, indicating a high level of investment in these environments. While it is generally agreed that the social aspect of MMOs makes them special, the factors of social attraction are unclear. In this paper, we have examined the concept of group identity composed of cognitive, behavioural and affective components in the context of World of Warcraft guilds and discussed how these components are exhibited and contribute to the group identity. Our preliminary survey shows that while affective

component seems to be the strongest, the results are not conclusive. Understanding factors that strengthen groups is critical for designing MMOs that can maintain and grow their user base.

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