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This study used content analysis to examine World of Warcraft realm forum threads directed at an individual with the intent to criticize in-game behavior. The study sought to determine if call-out threads share a common structure, and to define the process of posting and responding to call-out threads. The study collected data from sixty threads across seventeen server forums

Data analysis suggested that call-out threads shared a pattern of posting and response in which an audience acted as judge and jury to establish the credibility of the individuals in conflict and to declare a symbolic winner by providing or withholding favor. World of Warcraft call-out threads provided community members with the opportunity to negotiate what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate gaming behavior while maintaining a light, playful environment.

Headings:

      Computer games -- Social aspects.

      World of Warcraft.

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      Internet games -- Social aspects.

@YOU: AN ANALYSIS OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT REALM
FORUM CALL-OUTS

by
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Introduction

World of Warcraft, a fantasy-based massive multiplayer online game (MMOG), boasts over 11.5 million subscribers across the globe (Blizzard, 2008). Parent company Blizzard Entertainment encourages the maintenance and protection of a large online community. Players interact within the game, and also through online forums, official and player-created websites, and offline at yearly conventions.

With such a large player base and the opportunity for social interaction, World of Warcraft (WoW) frequently appears in scholarly research, particularly as a learning environment. The game offers enough depth to be experienced by a range of players, from casual, novice players to more experienced gamers that log on frequently. Accessing information sources and interacting with other players is integral to game progression and the development of proficiency.

Forums offer the opportunity for community members to seek and share knowledge about the game. Forums allow asynchronous, text-based communication for individuals physically separated by geography. On a web forum, community members engage in both informational and social behaviors (Burnett, 2000).

The World of Warcraft community has both official, Blizzard sponsored forums and unofficial, player sponsored forums. Blizzard breaks the official forums by topic to assist players in locating relevant information. Topics include technical support, guild recruitment, general discussion, and off-topic discussion.

To post threads or responses, a player must log in with his/her account information. Posts appear under the name of one of a player's characters. Players can create up to ten players per server, with a total of fifty across servers. The use of avatars during game play provides pseudonymity, but players tend to spend most of their time on one character, known as a "main." Less frequently played characters are referred to as "alts." A main's gear and skill level represent the progress of a player in WoW, and he/she becomes most associated with this avatar when interacting with other players. In contrast, alts increase anonymity, since no outward connection exists between mains and alts. The only way to know that two characters are associated with the same account is by a player divulging this information.

This study sought to analyze posting behavior on a World of Warcraft realm forum. Unlike other WoW forums, realm forums exist specifically for the community of a given server. Information sharing on a realm forum occurs between gamers who play on the same server and have the opportunity to interact in game. In particular, this study focused on threads directed at a specific player with the intent to critique and/or blacklist them following conflict in game. The name of the accused appears in the subject line of the thread, often preceded by an @ symbol. These forum call-outs represent the intersection between flaming, trolling, and helpful warnings as gamers in conflict direct community attention toward their problems. This study examined call-out threads on WoW realm forums to determine if a common structure exists, and to define the process of posting and responding to call-out threads.

Literature Review

World of Warcraft as an Online Community

Like most MMOGs, World of Warcraft offers solo play or the opportunity to group with other players. Although Muramatsu and Ackerman (1998) found that "activity on a system can be social without being sociable" (p. 119), evidence suggests that the social factor keeps gamers returning to WoW (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). The game creates a shared experience through collaborative play and carries the "reward of being socialized into a community of gamers and acquiring reputation" (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006, p. 407).

Even when choosing to play alone, an inherent social presence exists in WoW. Chat channels create a persistent feeling of shared space. Each zone and city has a chat channel in which players can broadcast information to multiple players simultaneously. Guild chat allows players who join a guild to converse with each other. Local defense, trade, and guild chat channels tend to envelop players in pervasive background chatter (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). Constant conversation not only enables players to increase game proficiency, but also "is the very fodder from which individuals create and maintain relationships of status and solidarity and, in part, in game community and cultural norms" (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p. 893).

In addition to chat channels, players can depend on encountering regulars and typical, expected behavior. Regulars include guildies and squatters, or individuals loitering in specific game areas like cities. Regulars serve to stabilize the community by offering help, by enforcing social mores through teasing and language play, and by making connections with other players (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Steinkuehler and Williams characterize MMOGs structurally as Oldenburg's third places. Game spaces are playful and depend on verbal word play and humor to keep the mood light, as gamers

desire escapism and immersion and for the most part avoid bringing heavy or complicated real life matters to the game. The presence of regulars provides a sense of home, and a fulfilled expectation of who one will encounter during game play.

In MMOGs, other players also provide an audience to display status items. Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006) describe MMOGs as "reputation games" (p. 413) since gamers construct identity by equipping gear, meeting game achievements, and obtaining rare items. When encountering another player, one can glean information about the kind of gamer he/she is based on both conversation and gear. The fictional element of gaming allows players to accept the ambiguous identities of others, as identity within a gaming environment may or may not directly relate to identity in the real world (Donath, 1999). However, avatars become associated with the crafted online identity of a gamer, who becomes invested in maintaining that identity (Lee, 2005).

MMOGs like World of Warcraft enable players to become immersed in a culture specific to the game. World of Warcraft reinforces learning and game play by increasing difficulty and rewards as players level and access end game content. Steinkuehler (2004) uses flow theory and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development to describe learning in MMOGs - gamers are challenged to play at the boundaries of their current competency and constantly move towards the mastery of more difficult tasks, enhancing play and increasing engagement. Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006) describe WoW as a "virtual Skinner box" that keeps players performing "always on the edge of new abilities and new content" (p. 416). Task mastery is socially reinforced, as players earn bragging rights and the ability to represent game accomplishments with experience or gear that increase social status (Steinkuehler, 2004).

As players learn the game and take part in its activities, they begin to recognize and accept valued community practices and move from the periphery towards becoming a member of the community. Objects and structures gain meaning in relation to community membership, and are understood through shared values. Players in MMOGs experience "reciprocal apprenticeship, through which individuals enculturate one another into routine and valued practices and perspectives, and a culture of collective intelligence evidenced in the joint creation, maintenance, and transformation of shared online repositories of community knowledge and skills" (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 2).

Once encultured in an online community like World of Warcraft, individuals share an unwritten code of conduct that helps define appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Basic appropriate behaviors include maintaining a playful atmosphere, being polite, and offering help to other players when able. Players can choose to take part in inappropriate behaviors such as "ninjaing" or stealing items from other players, but this often results in blacklisting, as community members publicize the name of the ninja and collectively refuse to group with the thief, blocking him from participating in many game activities. By punishing inappropriate behaviors, gamers reinforce the positive values of the community.

Verbal Aggression and Escalation

In an online environment, a lack of nonverbal cues coupled with the ambiguous identities of individuals increase the possibility for misunderstandings and interpersonal conflict. Anonymity allows individuals to release their inhibitions and react to a perceived insult in ways that they would not offline (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Personal constructions of meaning can lead to misunderstandings, and

participants in conflict studies sometimes feel that arguments occurring online would not happen in person since speaking with someone face-to-face allows explanation of one's point of view and a stronger desire to control emotions (McKee, 2002).

Impression management theory posits that human behavior focuses on an external audience. In public, people tend to behave in ways that result in a positive response from an audience. Perceived attacks on identity often result in interpersonal conflict (Felson, 1978). Perception results in aggressive behavior when one person views the actions of another as provocation, and the reaction of the offended party can be viewed as provocation by the first. Often both individuals believe that they are the victim of provocation, or forced into aggressive behavior by the actions of the other person. In many conflicts, the roles of victim and aggressor are not static (Winstok, 2004). Conflicts escalate through retaliatory aggression, as the individual who perceives provocation feels moral justification to punish the other party for his/her attack (Felson, 1982). Insults release individuals from the need to be polite, and cause an unequal power situation where the insulted individual offers a counterattack to display his/her strength and regain comparable status to the aggressor (Felson, 1978).

Conflict does not occur in a vacuum, but depends on time, place, and audience (Winstok, 2004). When situated in the context of an online community, actors in a disagreement are embedded in the culture of the environment, and this provides a framework for individual perspectives. Conflict can arise when one party lacks familiarity with the culture, due to personality differences, or because of environmental interaction (Stokes, 1976).

When an individual in conflict realizes that he has conducted behavior outside of what

is culturally appropriate, he performs aligning actions to position himself with the norm
(Stokes, 1976; Felson, 1982). Aligning actions allow an individual to attempt to place his
actions more closely toward accepted cultural mores. When using aligning actions, a
person verbalizes his conduct by providing an account, giving an apology, explaining
motives, offering theories of his behavior, disclaiming, or requesting (Stokes, 1976).

Felson (1982) found that conflicts and sanctions were less severe if either party
provided an account of their actions. An actor makes an account to explain behavior that
deviated from the cultural norm, whether the cause of the inappropriate behavior came
from the actor or a different person. Accounts decrease the gap between actions and
expected behavior and assume that an audience exists to judge the account (Felson,
1982). Accounts either appear as excuses, "socially approved vocabularies for mitigating
or relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned" (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 47), or
justifications, where an individual accepts responsibility for his behavior but denies that
the behavior had a negative effect (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

The audience receiving the account can choose to either accept or to not honor the
account, depending on their perception of the identities of the actors involved in the
conflict. During the account, the identities of the actors and audience must be established
to provide a framework for judging the account's validity. Accounts are considered
illegitimate if the gravity of the conflict outweighs the account and unreasonable if the
reasons provided for the action do not fit in with cultural expectations (Scott & Lyman,
1968).

Trolling and Flaming on Online Forums

The absence of nonverbal cues in online interaction promotes misunderstandings and

encourages de-individuation, making computer-mediated communication more inflammatory than offline interaction (Lee, 2005; Chapman, 1995). The ambiguity of online identity makes interactions difficult to understand, and individuals focus on the available cues and information they have about who they are communicating with (Donath, 1999; Franco, Hu, Lewestein, Piirto, Underwood, & Vidal, 2000). Cues that help define the identities of posters on online forums include signatures and virtual reputations (Donath, 1999). Regular interaction increases co-communicants' opportunity for identity cueing and for learning about identity via self-disclosure (Lee, 2005).

Multiple degrees of identification exist online in a continuum from full anonymity to named. Pseudonyms allow the development of reputation, while anonymity offers so few cues that reputation is not involved (Donath, 1999). Using a pseudonym does not necessarily decrease accountability, since an individual has an associated reputation or crafted identity to maintain (Lee, 2005). However, selecting alternate names or identities can release inhibition (Chapman, 1995).

Reputation and status encourage individuals to post threads on online forums. Status enhancement from gaining approval of other forum members motivates people to offer advice and knowledge even without getting anything tangible in return (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Dholakiaa, Bagozzia, & Klein Pearo, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Besting an opponent in a verbal conflict similarly brings status to the poster and provides entertainment for community members reading the thread.

Online conflicts that progress to verbal aggression often result in flaming. Gary Burnett (2000) defines flaming as "online ad-hominem argumentation, aiming neither for logic nor for persuasion, but purely and bluntly at insult" (Flaming section, para. 1).

Flaming often arises out of a disagreement or a specific incident. Unlike flamers, who direct comments at one person or group often based on a particular incident, trolls seek to incite the tempers of multiple individuals as a form of recreation. Trolling comments appear in the form of general negative remarks, like "This server sucks" or as sarcastic generalities such as "Heroics are serious business." In contrast, flames are directed at an individual, like "You are an idiot."

The act of trolling allows status enhancement, as successful trolls gain peer admiration for cleverness (Donath, 1999). Trolls use identity deception as recreation to lure others into pointless discussion (Donath, 1999; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Herring et al. listed three criteria for trolls: the sender appears sincere; the sender authors messages designed to elicit negative responses; and the sender uses argumentation to waste time. Trolling and flaming often overlap and combine, and both lead to lengthy arguments. Trolling allows community members to discuss and decide what behavior is appropriate for forums and can serve to reinforce group identity (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Similarly, although flaming has a negative effect and can be divisive for the community, flames also promote the examination of community issues, allowing the community to negotiate values and behaviors deemed acceptable. Flaming can reinforce existing bonds between community members or cause an individual with differing values to leave the shared space (Franco, Hu, Lewestein, Piirto, Underwood, & Vidal, 2000).

Pruitt, Parker, and Mikolic (1997) defined a continuum of verbally aggressive behavior that increases in escalation, beginning with requests, and moving through demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and finally reaching abuse. Fewer

people employed higher levels of verbal aggression, stopping with lower level tactics. When in-game conflict occurs in World of Warcraft, players move through the earlier stages of the continuum in-game. The decision to post a flame on a realm forum demonstrates that conflict has already escalated to later stages of verbal aggression. The poster provides an account of the conflict to the community in hopes of causing negative sanctions for his/her foe or for the purpose of justifying his/her actions during the disagreement.

In an incident of flaming or trolling, a probe often occurs to determine the honesty of the poster and sanctions are imposed for those who deceived. Sanctions discourage inappropriate behavior by effecting the pseudonymous identity (Donath, 1999). Alonzo et al. found that individuals with a high level of anxiety flame for the purposes of escape and relaxation, while assertive, controlling personalities tended to flame to pass the time.

Trolls on World of Warcraft realm forums typically fit the second and third criteria described by Herring et al., but for the most part do not bother to appear sincere. The existence of trolls in-game and on the forums is an accepted part of the game culture. Trolls function as "regulars," adding to the playful nature of the community through language. Word play online, and in WoW, encourages a fun environment and can either be in jest or employed to provoke others with hostile messages (Lee, 2005). As Chapman 1995) describes forum rhetoric: "Goofy opinions and comical disregard for facts are rampant. Spelling is haphazard and even simple typos sometimes produce absurd flaming firefights. Nearly every reasonable discussion is sooner or later discovered by someone with a hobby horse or an abrasive personality and there are few reliable ways to shunt such people elsewhere" (p.14).

Hobby trolls frequently appear on World of Warcraft realm forums, leaving trolling comments across a variety of topics. Rather than create threads, hobby trolls tend to surf through the forum and post responses to the questions and comments of other players. One frequent poster on the Whisperwind realm forum, a pseudonymous level one character named Sage, commented, "Back when I played on Anetheron (and trolled that realm forum), there were so many trolls that if one of us stayed up late, we'd try to fill the whole right column with our name. There are some screenshots somewhere showing what happened on slow nights. xD It was almost competitive."[1] Flaming threads frequently include trolling posts as trolls attempt to further excite emotions or cause infighting between individuals, even posters not originally associated with the conflict being discussed.

Methodology

Research Questions

The researcher used content analysis to search for patterns in realm forum call-out threads. The researcher was particularly interested in community reaction, how the credibility of the first poster was established or undermined, and common types of insults and language used. The researcher expected to see a pattern of aggression and response in the call-out threads based on the status of the individual recounting the conflict and on the community values of World of Warcraft players.

Data Collection

For the United States and Canada, Blizzard maintains two hundred thirty-nine

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[1] Sage, in a response post to the forum thread @Sage, http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=24038430811&sid=1 (accessed April 11, 2010). The researcher captured realm forum quotes between May 31 and June 16, 2010 and reports them as recorded, but realizes that this data is ephemeral and may be removed from the realm forums at any time. Quotations were collected from http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/child-forum.html?forumId=11119.

realms with populations between 1,500 and 37,000 players. Players choose between one of three realm types; player vs. environment (PvE), player vs. player (PvP), or role-playing (RP). The game mechanics remain the same across realm type, realm types simply allow for the emphasis of certain types of game play. Gamers might focus on questing, fighting other players, or staying in character. To reduce variables, the researcher chose to examine realm forums for PvE realms.

During previous research on the Whisperwind realm forum, fifteen threads were categorized as flaming threads. Returning to the realm forum to collect additional data, the researcher found that only three of the fifteen threads remained. This realization highlighted the difficulties of studying call-out threads on WoW realm forums – Blizzard moderators can remove posts or entire threads deemed inappropriate. Individuals posting to threads can also remove their own comments at a later time for any reason, whether they thought better of the comments or erroneously posted multiple times. A visit to the Wayback Machine at the Internet Archive did not enable the viewing of older posts.

The temporal element of adding posts to threads also complicated data collection. What constitutes a completed thread? Waiting too long for threads to grow in volume carries the threat of thread or post removal. Threads grow organically as individuals add comments soon after the thread was created, or rediscover an old thread and add a new comment to push the information to the top of the realm forum. Lacking a concrete end, call-out threads had to be analyzed as they appeared at the moment of collection. The researcher collected call-out threads between May 31 and June 16, 2010, and copied each thread into a Google document to record the information present during data collection.

The researcher roughly categorized realms as large, medium, or small depending on number of players. Realms with populations below 10,000 were considered small; populations between ten and twenty thousand were considered medium; and populations above twenty thousand were characterized as large. After creating a list of PvE realms sorted by population size, the researcher arbitrarily selected large, medium, and small realms for data collection. Occasionally a realm forum offered little data, either due to a lack of call-out threads or to a recent house cleaning by a Blizzard moderator. When this occurred, the researcher collected data from a new realm. The researcher chose to collect sixty call-out threads, twenty threads per server size. Sixty threads offered a large amount of data, but remained manageable for analysis within project time constraints.

Call-out threads were defined as threads directed at a specific player with the intent to critique and/or blacklist them following in-game conflict. Player names typically appeared in the subject line of the thread, often preceded by an @ symbol or followed by an accusation. Occasionally, subject lines contained an accusation clearly directed at an individual, but the poster waited to identify the player within the body of the initial post ("Reporting a ninja'er"). Threads directed at a player with the intent of positive interaction, such as greetings, friendly jokes, or well wishes were not included in the study.

Data Analysis

Content analysis offers a way for researchers to find meaning in the content of human communication through the identification of symbols. During content analysis, a researcher notes symbols, determines the frequency with which they occur, and finds the terms that individuals use to communicate those symbols. Although more organic than

other types of analysis, content analysis must be objective and systematic (Berelson, 1952).

Krippendorff (2004) argues that texts lack single meanings, but can be read from various perspectives. Communication has multiple levels of meaning to the readers, and these meanings may differ from the meaning constructed by researchers. The context of information and its use play a role in determining meaning. A general framework of content analysis requires text, a research question, context, an analytical construct, inferences, and validating evidence.

The researcher collected a body of text from the World of Warcraft realm forums, and analyzed the data in terms of its context and users, WoW community members. The data were examined for patterns, and the researcher inferred meaning based on frequently occurring language and structure. Quotations were used to support inferences.

For analysis, each thread and its accompanied posts equaled a discrete unit. For the overall thread, the researcher noted the level of anonymity of the poster; the topic of complaint; whether the accused responded and how; the length (in days) that the thread lasted; the number of responses; the number of views; the server size; and the number of unique posters. The researcher noted common responses and attempted to determine the most influential poster, when present.

The researcher identified common topics of concern and categorized threads by topic of complaint. The calculation of simple percentages allowed comparison of similarities and differences for realm size, for temporal length of call-outs, to determine the relative importance given to topic of complaint, and the relationship of response to number of views. The researcher used representative quotes to illustrate findings and

detailed major trends in the results section.

Results

Content analysis of World of Warcraft realm forum posts suggested that a general structure exists to call-out threads. Threads functioned to socially reinforce community values and codes of conduct. Initial posters brought grievances to community attention, and then community members acted as judge and jury, deeming complaints as worthy or not worthy. Discussions allowed players the opportunity to identify actions detrimental to the gaming experience, and to argue the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Call-out threads also offered a space for entertainment and public spectacle, as the audience teased and further incited drama. This section offers general information on the structure of call-out threads. Further sections go more in depth about Common Complaints, Insults and Language, Audience, Establishing Credibility, and "Winning."

General Structure

The original call-out identified the accused in the subject line or in the body of the text and appeared in the form of a flame. Ad hominem insults based on player performance, gear, or personal character accompanied a description of the in-game conflict. Posting a call-out thread implies that conflict was not resolved to an individual's satisfaction in the game, and that the poster wished to bring the story to a wider audience in an attempt to elicit community response, in the form of further slandering the accused or bringing sanctions against him/her. Many posters shared an awareness of typical forum response to call-out threads, but choose to provide the story to the public regardless of expected results.

"@ Mavricke/Zerohour. Grow up. I don't give a rat's dungsack if I get forum banned for this. I am going to say what I want to say to you." Hoochi, level 80, Aerie Peak server

"@Selendis. I'm aware you probably won't see this. And that the rest of you will be like "LOL UR GAY UR ARGUMENT IS STUPID." But if you see someone do something wrong in VoA 25 [Vault of Archavon 25-man raid], you tell them they do something wrong. You dont keep iLevel improvement gear from them when they are the only class for that item. Sorry broski, u r jackass." Gutgutter, level 1, Hydraxis server

Following the initial post, community members weighed in as judge and jury to determine if the complaint warrants serious consideration. As examined in more detail in a later section of this paper, a process of establishing credibility occured. The community scrutinized the original poster's language, complaint, and avatar to decide whether to support or reject his/her comments.

Concurrently, the audience added jokes, insults, and asides to entertain and incite a continuation of arguments. As detailed later in this paper, the audience consisted of regular commentators and hobby trolls who sought to entertain and be entertained. The audience functioned as judge and jury, kept the thread going, and established a light mood. Community members strove to ground conflict in the playful atmosphere of World of Warcraft, an immersive environment that holds serious or real life problems at bay.

Topics with relevance to the community as a whole, like ninjaing and game playing etiquette, often resulted in discussions as players negotiated what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Community favor tipped more heavily towards support of one poster or idea, but resolution, in the sense of solving the bigger issues, did not occur. Call-out threads simply allowed the identification of common problems, the examination of problem boundaries, and the sharing of ideas about how to lessen the

impact of issues.

Temporal Continuation

Posts typically ran their course within a period of two days or less. Fifty-eight percent of the call-out threads ended after two days. Longer running threads often had the bulk of the posts occurring within the first two days following the initial post, but with outliers or brief flurries of activity appearing later. Some threads lasted as long as one to two months. These threads tended to have more posts and a response by the accused. However, threads lasting shorter time periods shared these characteristics and did not significantly differ in pattern from threads stretching out longer temporally.

The few threads that ran for a period of a month to two months all occurred on large servers, but did not share common reasons for long-term argument maintenance beyond the added drama of more numerous posts. The longest thread, which received responses for two months following the initial post, dealt with etiquette for tipping jewelcrafters. Many community members weighed in with opinions on appropriate tipping behavior and suggestions for avoiding the conflict in the future. Trolls focused on the poor grammar of the accused and the original poster, offering Low-English-to-English translations of the conflict, increasing opportunities for teasing. Of the other two threads that ran for a month, one involved an accused that freely admitted his guilt and justified his inappropriate actions by arguing that since conflict did not occur in real life, it should not be a concern. This resulted in a negative community reaction, and long term flaming for the accused. The second month-long thread continued due to in fighting between two audience members. One individual supported the accused and the second instigated arguments due to his own boredom (as stated in the thread). The two

exchanged insults about gear and game proficiency not related to the initial post.

Responses and Views

The call-out threads examined had between 0 and 68 responses, with an average of 16 and a median of 10.5. Views ran from 39 to 1634, with an average of 434 and a median of 376.5. Larger numbers of views corresponded with a higher number of thread responses. Threads with high numbers of views tended to contain lengthier discussions about etiquette or longer attempts to establish poster credibility. The more arguing the community participated in within a thread, the higher the response and viewing rate, as verbal sparring increased entertainment value of a thread.

Realm Size

The general structure of call-out threads did not differ from small to large realms. Topics, audience, and the cycle of the discussions remained similar across realm size. Since only a portion of players on a given realm view that realm's forums, one can hypothesize that larger realms have larger realm forum audiences. Call-out threads on large servers tended to have more posts and views, followed by medium sized servers, and the small servers had the fewest average posts and views.

	Average Posts	Average Views
Large Servers	18.6	538.7
Medium Servers	17.9	446.85
Small Servers	12.55	316.25

Data collection suggested that the accused party responded to call-out threads in a greater rate as server size increased. Thirteen out of twenty (65%) call-outs on large

realms resulted in a response from the named party, while accused individuals responded to eight of twenty (40%) call-out threads on medium servers, and one out of twenty (5%) on realms categorized as small. This discrepancy likely related to the number of players from the realm that view forums. The relatively larger audience viewing threads on a large server provides a greater opportunity for individuals to recognize the name of the accused and to tell him/her about the call-out thread in game. In addition, a larger audience might increase the accused's desire to respond, as more people question his/her reputation.

Common Complaints

Across the sixty flaming threads, complaints tended to fall into one of six categories: Ninjaing; Etiquette; Proficiency; PvP; Other; and Not Specified.

Ninjaing

The bulk of the flaming threads (38%) revolved around ninjaing, implying that World of Warcraft players view ninjas as a common concern. Ninjaing refers to loot stealing. Ninjas disturb community values by purposely acting dishonestly in order to better themselves at the expense of other players.

In World of Warcraft, acquiring gear allows a player's character to gain statistics that increase performance. Gear demonstrates player knowledge about his/her class, since certain items have more benefit to certain classes of characters. For example, a casting class like a mage would want to select gear with spell power rather than attack power. Theory crafters develop specific optimum stats via trial and error and post data on the best talent specifications and gear statistics for each class on blogs, forums, and websites. Players indicate their proficiency via performance and knowledge about

correct gear and talents.

Players acquire difficult to obtain gear and loot to demonstrate the completion of challenging game objectives. Rare or powerful items provide a player with status, offering a physical manifestation of game accomplishments. Players seek to improve a character's gear, or to obtain rare items like mounts that drop very occasionally following a boss kill. Winning loot provides the gratification of a gambling win and can increase status and character performance in the game.

Players obtain loot through a need or greed loot system. For each piece of loot that drops, players select need for items that will improve their character or greed for items that they don't need. Players who select need get higher priority for winning the item than players who select greed. If multiple players need on an item, the game randomly assigns rolls between one and one hundred, and the highest roller receives the item. Blizzard altered the system to discourage abuse by allowing only classes that can equip an item to select need. For example, only paladins, warriors, and death knights can wear plate armor, so only these three classes have the ability to select need on a plate item that drops. Previously, anyone could need any item, which resulted in players taking items they could not possibly use to sell and make money.

In a raid setting, where more challenging bosses must be killed to obtain valuable loot, the need or greed system is not frequently used. One member of the raid acts as the master looter, posts the dropped items and asks for interested raid members to roll on the items. The master looter then distributes the loot to the highest roller. Raid members must trust that the master looter will give items to the highest roller rather than keeping it for him/herself or giving it to a friend. In general, players attempt to raid with friends

and guildies to decrease the possibility of having loot stolen by a dishonest master looter.

Players from smaller guilds often join pick up groups, or pugs, to make a group of twenty-five for raiding. Pugging increases the opportunity for ninjas to steal gear, since raid members do not always know each other.

Ninjas steal loot by needing on items that they won't use or by incorrectly looting items during a raid. Ninjas disrupt community expectations by breaking the rules set up to fairly distribute loot. The actions of ninjas violate honesty, fairness, and occur at the expense of another player.

> "A thief and a liar. I mean lets be open, we call it ninja but really its stealing. You took something that did not belong to you. It shows what kind of person you are when you have to steal from people and then lie about it. 24 people trusted you to do the right thing and instead you let your selfishness dictate how you would act and stole something from someone. nice. enjoy your life, I'm sure its filled with many other shortcomings." Delinna, level 80, Skywall server

Threads about ninjaing behavior often combined flaming, a desire to warn other players about characters to avoid grouping with, and the hope of blacklisting a ninja. Community members offered support and empathy towards posters complaining about ninjas, or added information about the ninja to help keep him out of groups. Serial ninjas typically pay to change their character name and race or use an alt to continue stealing gear.

> "Freshester name changed [used a paid Blizzard service to cloak identity] to Menchaca. Do not group with him." Deathsmaker, level 55, Magtheridon server

> "Xeo claims to be the GM [guildmaster] of his guild, and he doesn't discourage ninjas...so it might be best to avoid the whole guild." Demonis, level 80, Skywall server

> "You are supposed to trust the ML [master looter] to follow their rules yes, however if they don't GMS [Blizzard general managers] can and most

times will step in and award the item to the rightful person." Cloudcap, level 80, Garona server

Community members also pointed out behavior that might help a player avoid getting ninjaed.

"ICC 25 [Icecrown Citadel 25-man raid] with a ML [master looter] who is unguilded and who is not well known with a great reputation. Good plan." Notnice, level 64, Garona server

"I even said in trade you will lose your soul if you join his pug. [pick-up group, a group of strangers that joins up briefly to raid]" Aurevoir, level 80, Skywall server

Etiquette

Twenty percent of flaming threads dealt with game etiquette. A variety of topics fall under the category of game etiquette, but essentially these threads commented on actions that defied the unspoken community values of politeness and consideration for other players. Threads concerning etiquette often contained discussions between community members as they attempted to clarify the boundaries between what behavior is and is not appropriate.

Several etiquette threads dealt with leaving groups without explaining one's actions. Community members weighed in on whether randomly leaving a group is worth complaining about, and if it reflects the player's character or merely implies they had other, more important activities to complete in real life.

"I agree people have no courtesy anymore, thats kinda like hey thx for the loot now *%%@ off. They should have harsher penalties for people that do that." Freshbrewed, level 17, Firetree server

"like all i can say now is grow up if u have to have a tantrum about people leaving a 5 man heroic, then post it on the forums...as we all know there is 2 sides to a story of which we have not heard theirs, maybe that had more mature issues outside the game at hand yea?" Retribution, level 80, Echo Isles server

Another discussion occurred during an argument about a jewelcrafter who refused to complete a transaction due to what he considered a low tip. Community members attempted to reach consensus on what constitutes appropriate tipping behavior, and provided suggestions for avoiding similar problems in the future.

> "Why not just charge a flat fee if you are going to refuse service for 'low' tips?" Calbun, level 3, The Underbog server

> "Let me 'splain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up...You got your mats [materials for crafting items] back. Make your own profession alts [other characters with leveled professions that can craft for one's main], problem solved." Inigo, level 80, Whisperwind server

> "I kind of agree that a tip is a tip and not a fee for service. If you are spamming trade Jewelcrafter LFW [looking for work] tips appreciated and you get a low tip, well lifes a Bia, move on. Now if you are spamming trade Jewelcrafter LFW 30Gold per cut and somebody is only putting 5 gold in the trade bar, then you have a valid argument to act a fool." Baene, level 80, Whisperwind server

Proficiency

Frequent World of Warcraft players operate on the assumption that most other gamers encountered in grouping activities will have basic knowledge of how to play their class. A gamer might play poorly due to inattention, lack of knowledge and experience about his/her class, or infrequent gaming. Altercations occasionally arise when an individual feels like a group member is not pulling his or her weight to the detriment of the group. Fifteen percent of call-out threads dealt with incidents surrounding a player's alleged lack of proficiency. These threads often caused the accused individual or guild to respond to demonstrate that their actions were related to something other than a lack of skill.

> "To the OP [original poster], I'll be sure to give them a super serious firm talking to about how important heroics are! I mean really how could they

possibly be goofing off in a Heroic when they need to be really, really pumping out the dps and be focused for them. Did THEY miss the memo that randoms are as serious business? Maybe I need to put a better cover letter on it next time." Malady, level 80, Gnomeregan server (guildmaster of a guild that received a call-out)

"Hammy is actually an amazing tank. On "the day in question" when he "went afk [away from keyboard] because he didn't like the dungeon we got" and then "wouldn't respond to anything we said" he actually went AFK because our daughter had fallen down the stairs and got a bloody lip. I took care of her but he was worried and ran to help. Stuff happens, you know. And when he got back they were talking such crap about him he didn't know what to say and decided to just let them kick him from the group. lol." Sassara, level 80, Whisperwind server

In instances where a player questioned the skill of another player, the community reacted as the judge and jury, determining who to side with based on credibility. The stronger story won, and the community mocked the loser. In cases where the accused responded, the community tended to side with the accused, accepting accounts and arguments as proof that the player had an excuse for a momentary lack of proficiency.

PvP

Player vs. player, or PvP, refers to combat between two gamers. PvP can occur spontaneously in the game when members of opposite factions encounter each other and fight. PvP also takes place in controlled environments called battlegrounds and arenas, where gamers can earn points and gear for battling other players.

"The element of human intelligence, skill, and unpredictability when facing other players instead of computer-controlled enemies is one of the main draws of participating in PvP (Blizzard, 2004-2010)." PvP offers the opportunity to best an opponent, momentarily gaining increased status in relation to another player. The competitive nature of PvP occasionally results in escalation and the creation of personal conflict.

Thirteen percent of flaming threads referred to PvP conflicts. PvP perhaps relates more closely to ego than other types of in-game conflict, since losing the battle results in an avatar's death. Unlike other types of conflict, where results may be arguable, PvP has a clear winner and a clear loser.

Most PvP threads involved an initial poster attempting to create or continue verbal conflict. World of Warcraft has two factions, Horde and Alliance. Members of the opposing faction appear hostile when encountered in the game and can be killed, while members of the same faction appear friendly and cannot be killed. Horde and Alliance characters speak different languages within the game, so players express conflict through gestures or repeated killing ("camping"). Forums lack the language barriers of factions and offer a setting for verbal expression.

> "Killadelphia..you try world pvping and fail (as usual) so you had to send tells to my friend's pally alt to tell him how he's terrible because of a low HK count? You armory people when you rage? Really? I mean..REALLY?? If he's sooooo bad and killed you...that makes you...worst player ever? LOL" Lusira, level 80, Garona server

> "I don't care much if people call me noob, scrub, or any other words. What I do mind, though, is kid scumbags like you that think you are good and call other people scrubs, aka hypocrits [sic], if you know what this word means. Once again, grow up and get some friends (other than Dylanb - another fail sub 1300 retard). Or better, a parent because I know you are a motherless ogre irl [in real life]." Hoochi, level 80, Aerie Peak server

Community members tended to troll PvP threads, attack the original poster for bothering to post, and/or to display a lack of interest in the topic. The lack of audience interest likely relates to the fact that PvP conflicts are personal and only involve a few players. Players expect PvP while playing World of Warcraft, and the topic of PvP offers little opportunity for discussion since it does not challenge community norms.

The only PvP related thread that differed from this trend focused on a player who disrupted community norms by frequently disbanding Wintergrasp PvP groups to make his own faction lose. The player was suspected to be an alt of a member of the opposite faction. Here, the community reacted in similar ways to ninjaing or questions of etiquette, by offering more information about the situation, sympathy, and additional complaints to Blizzard about the individual in question.

> "Yeah, it's definitely stupid. I'm assuming based on the fact that horde has WG [Wintergrasp, a PvP zone], he did it again this morning. He did it to me three times already this week, and I've heard of several other times. Most of us have opened tickets, but let's be honest, it's probably not going to do any good. It's sad that the only way the horde can win is by having some guy come in and disband the WG raids." Mocharilla, level 80, Gnomeregan server

> "It sucks, but online games have griefers in them. Reform fast without the 'tard (and preferably nobody in their guild), and report them when possible. All you can do, really. Nothing will appear to happen to them for a bit, but it stacks up over time...." Kieote, level 80, Gnomeregan server

Other and Not Specified

Five percent of threads fell into the Other category, and eight percent into Not Specified. Other flaming threads simply did not fit into other categories, while Not Specified threads referred to those threads in which the poster offered little to no information on the topic of conflict. Not Specified threads contained random strings of insults or vague, unclarified references to conflict, such as "Dog!@*@ emo resto druid." The Other category collected unrelated topics like a player accusing another individual of hacking his account and a gamer flaming at a hobby troll's trolling.

Insults and Language

Posters in call-out threads used insults and language to negotiate power within the thread. Community members shared a common vocabulary of insults, wielded to

demonstrate humor and/or disinterest in the original flame. Trolls and flamers conducted attacks on individuals using ancillary website information about their avatars to mock gear and game progression.

World of Warcraft's playful nature encourages humor and word play to create a positive gaming environment that offers an escape from the stress of everyday life. The game culture supports a specific lexicon of jokes. Gamers use jokes to indicate status as an insider and to help maintain WoW's playful environment.

Community members commenting on flaming threads often employed humor to create a sense of entertainment, but also to indicate the lack of importance of a flamer's thread. Using common jokes at opportune moments allowed trolls to gain status as clever and humorous, while keeping arguments within the context of WoW. In one example, community members used variations of "cool story, bro" to show a lack of interest in the original poster's comments.

> "Cool story, bro." Ascetist, level 80, Eonar server

> "Quote: Cool story, bro. Cool Story Bro 2: This Time its Personal."
> Oonoes, level 80, Eonar server

> "Brool story cro." Katalii, level 1, Stormreaver server

Trolls employed more personal attacks to keep flaming threads going. Insults based on a character's gear and game progression attempted to wound player egos. The community understands that avatars represent an extension of self, and players use the term "epeen" to suggest that bragging about gear or game accomplishments is analogous to displays of masculinity.

> "Guys, my interwebz epeen is going through the roof, let's keep this thread
> going with more people that i have no problem with tellng me i'm bad."
> Notdrowzee, level 55, Dark Iron server

"A for effort! Im sure your pre-teen friends will be impressed as you tell a grand, epic story about your smarts and epeen that never took place." Falumose, level 80, Gnomeregan server

The ability to research character gear and progression enabled trolls to tailor attacks toward a particular poster. Poor gear, talent specifications, or a lack of progression were viewed as an indication that the poster lacked credibility, and offered an opportunity for the generation of insults. Websites like the World of Warcraft Armory allow anyone to search for a character and view gear, recent activity, and raiding or pvp history. Most threads included an analysis of the least credible commentator's gear to incite further arguments and insults.

"And just out of curiosity, how do you know I'm a mediocre player? Do I know you? Have I ran with you any?" Sergen , level 80, Echo Isles server "You gem resilience and haste in your pvp gear. Your unholy spec [talent specification] is beyond retarded. It's pretty obvious you're at least mediocre if not terrible." Dano, level 80, Echo Isles server

"Yeah, poke fun at my toon that hasn't been played seriously since February of last year. Want to dance? Try my priest and paladin: http://www.wowarmory.com/charactersheet.xml?r=Terokkar&n=almarada

http://www.wowarmory.com/charactesheet.xml?r=Terokkar&n=theodosis Oh, huh. Look at that, you look like an *%@## now." Azghul, level 80, Terokkar server

One poster summed up the most common insults employed on the realm forums with this sarcastic post:

"OMG UR BAD AT WORLD OF WARCRAFT AND CANNOT RAID. YOU HAVE NO ENCHANTS ON YOUR GEAR, ARE TERRIBLE DON'T KNOW THEORY CRAFT AND IMA GONNA MAKE A TOPIC ON THE GENERAL FORUMS TO LET YOU KNOW THAT I THINK YOU ARE A BAD PLAYER." Heybuddy, level 80, Cenarius server

Audience

The audience played a crucial role for realm forum call-out threads. Community members acted as judge and jury, deciding to accept or reject the accounts offered by the individuals in conflict and throwing support one way or the other to select a symbolic "winner." The audience also had the ability to incite further discussion to keep the thread going longer, or to end the thread through either disinterest or by the declaration of a victor.   Lastly, the audience functioned to keep the atmosphere playful, simultaneously providing entertainment and being entertained.

The audience for World of Warcraft realm forum call-out threads consisted of hobby trolls and community members who regularly read the forums. These two groups comprise the regulars that fill the virtual space of the message board. In addition, the audience included community members who may know the accused or have a stake in the argument. These members might be regulars who come across a call-out thread about someone they know, or have interacted with one of the players involved in the conflict.

Hobby trolls are individuals who read the forums for the purpose of leaving humorous or insulting comments intended to incite anger and discussion of anyone within a thread. Although some attempt to appear sincere in the form of a classic troll, most did not bother to hide their intentions and openly tried to excite emotions or increase personal status by making particularly humorous remarks. The majority of hobby trolls were low-level alts, providing anonymity and protecting the identity of the player's main character. Some trolls created alts for the purpose of forum trolling, and gave them names to indicate this, like Dwdotrollalt or Seemetrollin. Hobby trolls are an accepted and

expected part of the realm forums, and refer to themselves sarcastically at times.

> "*insert random insult about random guild on Skywall*" Vylandra, level 1, Bloodhoof server

> "But I don't want you to know who I am on Hydraxis, my guild doesn't really condone forum stupidity." Ipooped, level 7, Blade's Edge server

Regular forum readers take part in call-out thread discussions, offering serious advice or joining trolls for humorous commentary. These community members tended to post on guilded level 80s, characters that they likely play with some frequency in game and are associated with. Other regulars included individuals who became identified with a schtick and appeared across threads about a variety of topics to entertain other community members. For example, one regular on the Hydraxis realm forum named Bustycops frequently weighed in on discussions using pirate-speak. A regular named Social on the Whisperwind realm forums offered Low-English-to-English translations of conflict statements.

Posters on the realm forums can expect to encounter trolls, a playful atmosphere, and the comments of regular forum readers. In conflict situations, the audience participated in the now-public argument to weigh in on who behaved appropriately and inappropriately, and whether the incident warranted further discussion. Shaming individuals who acted inappropriately or reacting with disinterest allowed the community to negotiate and identify values of importance.

Establishing Credibility

Community members attempted to establish credibility once a player posted his/her call-out thread to the realm forum. In this process, the audience called for more evidence and analyzed the believability of the original poster based on narrative,

reputation, and language. Although occasionally support fell for both parties involved in the conflict, in general the community backed one individual from the conflict or displayed indifference to the complaint. Credibility seemed to be based on the audience's determination of a poster's identity and power.

Following a call-out post, the community immediately sought to answer the basic questions: Who are you and why should we care about your problem? The audience responded favorably to evidence, such as screen shots capturing the conflict in question. Screen shots boosted credibility that a conflict occurred and happened in the way that the poster reported. Screen shots require foresight, and the knowledge that the conflict will be reported publicly, either to the forums or to Blizzard employees as a formal complaint. Although few posters (seven out of sixty) provided screen shots of conflict, the community often referred to them as a way for the individual complaining to bolster his/her story.

> "Pics or it didn't happen. I personally don't like that guy either (Our guild has 400 people, so you're an idiot if you don't join, and lol, off for coffee in Vienna), but what you posted is
> A. Nearly unintelligible
> B. B. Baseless conjecture without screen shots." Nysmirc, level 80, Whisperwind server

> "SS [screen shot] or none of this happened." Broseff, level 4, Darrowmere server

> "So is there actual proof or just blibber blabber?" Ngan, level 80, Whisperwind server

Community members often requested additional information from the poster if complaints seemed vague or unclear. These requests served the dual purpose of keeping the thread going by adding more drama and allowing the poster to provide more evidence to support his/her story.

Initial post: "Crazyshort has been ninjaing runs for a while, starts crying like a 10 year old when people call him out on it, so people shouldn't join his runs, unless you think that's fun to have a raid leader act like that then go ahead." Gladiator, level 70, Bronzebeard server
Request for more information: "Can you elaborate? What happened? When was this? What was ninjaed?" Kirus, level 80, Bronzebeard server
Suggestion for stronger proof: "Screen-shots bring excitement." Goodness, level 80, Bronzebeard server

Initial post: "Do I seriously get to wait in the dungeon q [queue] for 25 minutes just for you to join and roll gear that you're already wearing? /sigh." Chambers, level 49, Jaedenar server
Request for more information: "I'm so confused. who are you, who is chongkong, and why should we care?" Swagfist, level 80, Tichondrius server

Initial post: "Subject: El Vibratos Armadaos. Latin for Douchebags with No Lives. Captgreendik. Bosswarrior. Samonsavage. Don't ever join up with these clowns. They enjoy getting people saved to weekly raids and dropping them just before killing the boss." Jamea, level 80, Uldum server
Request for more information: "Did we have a bad experience with these folks? If so explain please so we know what to watch for." Ailaure, level 80, Uldum server

In addition to judging the account of the story provided, community members used other available cues to establish the credibility of the individuals involved in the conflict. The audience seemed to link credibility with identity, reputation, and power. Proficient players tended to receive the benefit of the doubt, and support from character witnesses boosted reputation and implied honesty.

Community members quickly assessed the level of pseudonymity used by the original poster. Players leave forum posts under the name of a character, and can use either mains or alts. A main's gear and skill level represents the progress of a player in WoW, and he/she becomes most associated with this avatar when interacting with other players. In contrast, alts increase anonymity, since no outward connection exists between mains and alts. Posters using the name of a low level alt appeared less credible then

gamers who posted on a guilded level 80 character, since they give the impression of a

hidden identity. Community members often commented on the use of a low level alt for

posting a call-out, and requested that the player appear on his/her main.

> "Because the best way to be taken seriously is on a level 1 alt, amirite?"
> Feruyu, level 80, Skywall server
>
> "How can a level 3...ah, I see, so you fail at tanking, then decide to post on
> forum about someone who expected you to know how to do your job, and
> you can't even call them out on your main? You fail at 2 things
> apparently." Onenightstab, level 80, Hydraxis server
>
> "Lol bk is mad, you made my day. For all i know you could be linking
> some random persons character. Regardless, want a cookie? And fix this
> !@#$ alt that you insist on posting on." Feralice, level 80, Auchindoun
> server

Posting on a main provided the audience with an opportunity for using websites to

research the character's game progression. Community members used the World of

Warcraft Armory website to establish a player's gaming proficiency. The Armory

displays the gear, game achievements, and recent activity of each character. The

audience considered well geared and progressed players to be proficient and to have more

credibility then poorly geared players. Viewing gear encouraged further trolling and

flaming, as community members relished detailing incorrect gear as a way to insult other

players.

> "If you're going to lie, at least make sure Armory backs you up. Also
> don't make a level 1 on Gnomer and try to smear someone's name by
> saying they ninja'ed T10 [tier 10, gear of a high level] pants when they
> don't even need them. Honestly, it made you look like a tool because you
> decided to attack one of the most respected mages on server." Criseyde,
> level 80, Gnomeregan server
>
> Initial post: "Stop trying to tank. Seriously, do the Nightfall battlegroup a
> favor and queue up as DPS. Your armory entry puts you 100 points under
> the defense cap for heroics; I don't care if your GS [gearscore, an add-on
> that quantifies the quality of a player's gear] shows you at 4500, you're

not a f'ing tank." Keirisa, level 80, Uldaman server
Community examines the Armory entries of both the original poster and the accused, and supports the accused:
"Cool mediocre gear." Attack, level 35, Gnomeregan server
"Looking at your gear, you couldn't keep a tank up anyways. I bet you never miss a heal with 213 hit rating and resilience." Persaya, level 2, Drenden server
"Obviously the Tanks fault because this person clearly has the priest class locked down hard." Lonelder, level 80, Gnomeregan server
"31k health, uncrittable (Resil), ~30% avoidance including block...perfectly capable of tanking a Heroic with that gear. His threat in that gear should be fairly decent, too. Unless he was letting mobs run loose amongst the rest of the group or pulling two - three groups at a time, it's not the tank that sucked bud." Koraqtres, level 80, Arena Tournament 1

In one instance the character feed on the Armory website allowed community members to blow holes in the accused's denial. A character named Xeoslater was accused of stealing loot during a raid where he acted as the master looter. Community members used Xeoslater's recent activities to determine that he lied, and this proved that he was a ninja in the eyes of the realm forum audience.

Initial post: "During a VOA 25 [Vault of Archavon 25-man raid], Xeoslater was the raid leader and master looter. I won the roll but he took the loot anyway. Made up some excuse for the raid like he was trying to give me the loot but I wouldn't take it, hearthed and put me on ignore. Just thought everyone should know." Bortak, level 80, Skywall server

Accused's response: "woot im Efamous now, mind telling me what i ninjaed?" Xeoslater, level 80, Skywall server

Community member provides information based on Armory: "I would say it's probably the t10 [tier 10, gear of a high level] gloves you looted on the 25th." Yetikiller, level 56, Dethecus server

Accused makes excuse: "gloves i bought with frosties [frost emblems, currency needed to purchase certain types of gear] so yea." Xeoslater

Community uses Armory to debunk: "RLY? You can do better than that, but would we want you to? http://www.wowarmory.com/character-feed.xml?r=Skywall&cn=Xeoslater You ran out in the middle of your VOA raid to the "frosties" vendor to buy your gloves after you lost the

roll, right? And then ran back in to finish off a second boss? At least have the balls to own your leet ninja skillz." Grekai, level 10, Mal'Ganis server

"Nevermind the fact that you can't even buy i264 t10 [item level 264, tier 10 gear, a gear of a high level] with "Frosties"..." Sequelx, level 80, Skywall server

Accused maintains innocence: "Since you all have been stalking my armory page then you would see i have some icc 25 [Icecrown Citadel 25-man raid, the only other raid that allows the acquisition of the loot in question] loot, did you guys know that these token things drop from there? and yes i left mid voa run to get it because 2 tanks went afk [away from keyboard] so we stopped for 2 sec and i got it. Btw [by the way] the gloves didnt even drop. Anyways think what you will about me i really only get a laugh outa it." Xeoslater

Community continues to destroy excuses: "You have to be the worst liar I've ever seen. You haven't killed a boss in ICC since at least before April 22nd, when your character feed ends. I find it hard to believe you'd sit on a !@#%*ing tier token for over a month and then conveniently leave the VoA PUG [pick-up group, a group of strangers that temporarily join together to raid] in question to go spend it. By all means though, keep this going because it's just as hilarious for the rest of us reading your pathetic responses." Ramada, level 60, Lightbringer server

"Think what you will but yes i did sit on the token for over a month, like i said i dont pve so i dont have a quick income of frosties so once i got my badges i got my gloves and upgraded." Xeoslater

"At least everyone knows what you are now Xeoslater, hope those gloves were worth it." Bortak

Character witnesses stepped in to testify about accused individuals in an effort to discredit the original poster. Character witnesses tended to increase the credibility of the accused, and decreased the credibility of the individual complaining. The act of providing a testimonial of good character served to solidify existing community relationships.

"Back to reality, Genesis has really good peeps in it that I know of." Autologic, level 80, Echo Isles server

" If you read through the massive wall of text, what I'm attempting to

convey is that crazy is probably innocent and knowing gladiator's attitude, hes probably just upset over not getting some item or something. I say this based on past experiences with both of them and that's just what I believe." Silentslayer, level 80, Bronzebeard server

"Know him IRL [in real life], doubt he did this." Bardolph, level 80, Kil'Jaedan server

"Winning"

Although there is no stated winner, the community tended to collectively support or reject the original poster's position. Community members looked for identity cues to establish credibility, but also observed the discussion for signs of power. Realm forum threads shared characteristics of the dozens, a playful verbal sparring contest that occurs in front of an audience. Audience favor swayed toward posters who demonstrated verbal power and away from those that lost their cool.

The dozens function as a verbal contest in which players attempt to gain a higher status and position over an opponent by besting him/her with insults. Players compete by attempting to remain unflustered while receiving verbal attacks. Like the dozens, realm forum call-out threads contained verbal sparring between opponents and participating community members. An individual gained community support by exercising his/her power and maintaining a cool head.

> "The game suggests that control and personal power are gained by a rhetorical strategy of dominance based on verbal aggressiveness and forcefulness. The audience's response reinforces that impression by reacting favorably to players who attack and whose comebacks are forceful. Moreover, players are seen as symbolically giving up or falling apart when they fail to respond verbally (Garner, 1983, 52)."

Causing a player to lose composure entertained audience members and the community played an integral part in keeping the thread going or in cutting it short. The community threw support to a "winner," the person with the most credibility and/or

power, or ignored the complaint altogether. When the accused responded by playing it

cool, he/she regained status and tended to "win" as the original poster appeared to be less

credible. Unlike the dozens, realm forum call-outs were preceded by an actual in-game

conflict. Posting a call-out on a forum suggests that an individual has taken his/her anger

out of the game and to a new level by flaming at his victim. The original poster started at

a position of low credibility and must regain or establish credibility to have his/her

argument considered at all. When the accused party responded with an account, the

original poster's credibility and the power of his/her statement lowers further, unless the

accused admits guilt.

> <u>Initial post</u>: "Subject: redtube - lazy !@#$ healer. left cuz my fresh 80
> only had 3500 gs [gearscore, an add-on that quantifies the quality of a
> player's gear] and didn't want to "work that hard" his exact words... if
> healing is that hard for you, reroll now [create a different character to
> play], you obviously don't know how to play your class and fail at
> healing. I've healed much worse geared and wrong spec'd [talent
> specifications] tanks with ease, hell I've healed unholy dk [deathknight, a
> class in WoW] "tank." and oh ya we cleared it first time no wipes or
> deaths and battered hilt drop [a valuable, rare drop] (no lie), unfortunately
> i lost the roll to someone who has won it three times." Feralice, level 80,
> Auchindoun server

> <u>Accused's response</u>: "Hello friend, May i first say, i am glad your run
> went well and i'm sorry you lost the roll on a hilt. It is however with great
> sadness that i must not give a @#$% about you. I am deeply sorry that i
> left the fun because i, infact, have no good playdar. I also would like to
> correct one thing, i don't have a gearscore addon, nor do i care. What i
> saw was a tank in green dps [damage per second rather than tanking gear]
> gear, 26k hp [hit points] with fort and sanc [fortitude and blessing of
> sanctuary, two buffs that increase hit points], asking me to "Not leave
> because you have done it before." Thank you for the lovely post friend,
> again i am very sorry, and if i see you in a run again i will be sure to stay
> for a minute to relish in the fact that you are a good player in horrible gear.
> In love and friendship, Redtube." Drowzee (Redtube's main), level 80,
> Terokkar server

> <u>Original poster's response</u>: "lol, well played and no pun intended. thx for
> the reply." Feralice

Following this exchange, community members made fun of Feralice's gear and told him to leave the forums.

In another call-out thread, the original poster continued to spar with community members, but lost his/her cool. "Do you people not understand I did not have a problem, I want to know what I did to make me a fail #!%*ing tank or whatever was said. #!%* me people are retarded," Erzsebet, level 80, Shandris server. At this sign of weakness, the community increased its insults, focusing on Erzsebet's poor use of grammar, and asked him/her to leave the forums.

When both sides committed to playing it cool, long threads developed until someone broke. For example, a complaint about players seemingly lacking skill during an instance became a battle of wills between the accused guild's guild master and the original poster. Guildies weighed in with support and eventually caused the original poster to lessen his stance. Community members supported the well-known guild, and attempted to find the original poster's armory page in order to insult him further.

> Following the accused's sarcastic response, the original poster supports his position by also playing it cool: "It's not serious =) It's simply a slight hassle. I'd simply prefer to spread the word so people can avoid that little extra nuisance in their day. If I can save people a little time by not grouping with baddies, I feel like I've done a bit of service so they don't have to waste time like I did." Bumzab, level 80, Doomhammer server

> "Oh, it is very serious! You brought this to my attention and as the leader of TNT it's really important I fix this, they need to stop goofing off and get to work! How dare they waste someone's time by goofing off? I can't believe they'd even begin to THINK to have fun and be stupid in a heroic of all things, what were they thinking???? I thought you'd be happy to know I already made a post on the guild website addressing this...it's very serious. Thank you. Again I really, genuinely, am sorry for your misfortune of having to group with people that don't take your time seriously, it's valuable, I understand. Really. I do." Malady, level 80, Gnomeregan server

"Certainly you can "have fun" without sitting in flamestrikes =) I can't imagine anyone would be too upset about the time being wasted, however - given the option of wasting it and not wasting it? I'd probably choose the latter, which is sorta the point =) Just a casual reminder to watch out for baddies, nothing more." Bumzab

This argument continues until the guild's mage, accused of being bad, flames Bumzab and Bumzab loses his cool and begins taking the defensive, responding to quotes of other posters: "But....I really want to know if he's mad =(....Didn't I say I did it on my warrior. Fail is you." Bumzab

Once Bumzab broke, guildies and community members defeated him with their own accusations that he was actually a troll, and that the incident did not occur in the location or in the ways Bumzab described.

Implications

This study examined World of Warcraft realm forum call-out threads to determine if a pattern of posting and responding exists. The researcher expected to see a typical structure to call-out threads based on the status of the individual recounting the conflict, and on the community values of WoW gamers. Based on the data recounted previously, WoW realm forum call-out threads share a pattern: an individual alerts the community to in-game conflict; the community attempts to establish credibility of the parties involved in the conflict, and to verify the account provided through a process of fact checking, determination of player proficiency, and character witnesses; the community chooses to favor one side or the other, or quickly demonstrates a lack of interest by teasing and directed insults; and finally the thread dies down once the audience reaches majority consensus to support an individual in conflict, or to show disinterest in the post altogether.

Realm forums reflect the context of World of Warcraft – gamers seek and share

information to supplement game play in an environment focused on fun and escapism.

Users likely view call-out threads as entertainment, a way to create and observe drama by

complaining about other players. However, data suggested that call-out threads also

allow community members to discuss frequent areas of concern. Although forum posts

did not provide resolution to larger problems of inappropriate behavior in game,

community members could share information, provide sympathy, or unify in the face of a

rule breaker.

The data collected supported Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore's (2006)

assertion that MMOGs are essentially "reputation games (p. 413)." The importance

placed on player proficiency as evidenced by gear and game progression appeared as a

topic of complaint, a way to establish credibility, and as a frequently employed insult. In

a gaming environment, gamers preserve the reputation and identity of avatars, since the

identity of a character takes precedence over a real life identity within the game. WoW

realm forum call-out thread data suggested that gear plays an integral role in the creation

of identity, and becomes closely associated with status, reputation, and ego. Players with

more difficult to obtain gear were viewed as more proficient than players with poorer

quality, easier to obtain gear. Call-out thread data implied that gear not only allows the

estimation of gamer proficiency, but that proficiency increases the status and credibility

of the player. Gear comparisons and insults appeared over and over again in call-out

threads, signifying the importance that gamers place on gear as a way to define who

he/she is as a player.

A second major theme evident in call-out threads revolved around community

disapproval of inappropriate behavior and game etiquette. The topic of loot stealing

frequently appeared in call-out threads. Since players closely associated gear with identity and reputation, ninjaing could feel like victimization. Numerous discussions on game etiquette and ninjaing suggested a rich game culture as described by Constance Steinkuehler, where individuals become acclimated to a common culture of shared values. World of Warcraft does not merely provide virtual space for gamers to play alongside each other, but encultures players in an immersive environment that comes with basic expectations of propriety. Honor and fairness contribute to the positive, playful atmosphere of the game, and community members sought to maintain that atmosphere by identifying and sometimes providing sanctions for inappropriate behavior.

Content analysis provides the opportunity to "read" meaning from textual symbols. However, interviews with realm forum posters might give additional information on how community members define the function of call-out threads, and the extent to which they view the threads as an opportunity to negotiate community values. Further studies could focus on identity and reputation, and how players believe that these develop in World of Warcraft. The role of real life personality as it relates to posting behavior and reputation enhancement would help determine where real life identity ends and gaming identity begins.

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