

General Exams

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3) Design a study that examines the ways in which communication and collaboration take place during MMORPG gaming. Start by describing the research topic and then briefly considering the trade-offs between pursuing this research topic experimentally versus ethnographically. After doing so, frame the research question(s) associated with an ethnographic approach. Finally, develop a design for an ethnographic study of this topic. Be sure to address how and why you will select specific sites of study (e.g. the game, specific raid groups, guilds, etc.), what conceptual themes organize and bound the work, how you will gain entry / establish rapport with participants, what criteria would you use to recruit participants, what primary data you would anticipate wanting to collect using specific methodologies, how will you know when you can end your fieldwork successfully, and how might you intend to analyze these data to answer your research question(s). (In designing the study, please consider the option of collecting data from within the game experience as well as what occurs in the physical contexts of the participants.)

Research Topic

My research serves two major functions: 1) to study how certain gamers learn to cooperate with each other in shared activities and 2) to ask how gamers can be empowered and mobilized in both on *and* off-screen life by gaining an understanding of their relationships to a broader social context. Related agendas include making cross-setting comparisons with regards to teamwork and the design and implementation of tools or processes to enable more effective group work. Many businesses and community organizations depend on teams of people to work

on joint projects. Understanding how certain teams learn to work together in games could be a powerful way of understanding how teams could be structured and managed in non-game settings. Furthermore, I believe many social problems in general exist because not enough people are carefully reflecting on their actions and consequences. Looking at specific groups of gamers and their socio-political contexts can help us understand how they learn teamwork and how they understand their positions within the gaming sub-culture.

I say "certain gamers," "certain teams," and "specific groups" because I believe the management and structural work for any team should be done through an "organic" (Gramsci, 1971) understanding of the group. The process of implementing new ways of working should emerge from the group itself. Gaining a deep understanding of how this "authentic" work is done has to be done through ethnographic means (Freire, 1970/2000, esp. chapter 3, and Porter, 2001, for a great justification of ethnography). While survey research allows broad generalizations to be made about whole populations, survey conclusions only help researchers superficially understand player and group behavior. The results paint a hypothetical portrait of an unrealized entity and do not speak to what researchers would see in specific contexts. Likewise, findings from experimental research with the intent to find generalizations would be too limiting because these findings would not be authentically situated for other groups of players. It may be true that certain conditions as demonstrated by experimental research are more likely to encourage cooperative behavior in most groups, but implementing changes based on site-specific research can have larger benefits to the specific sites under study. Furthermore, enacting broad changes across whole populations based on survey or experimental research may perpetuate and exacerbate existing marginalization for some groups of people. In some cases, in fact, the simple act of normalizing demographics does certain groups of people a disservice

because a snapshot of a population cannot help us understand the history and position of specific groups. Findings from broad research (c.f., Yee, ongoing) are not specific to my experiences. I'm always left saying, "that's interesting, but it's not what I see." To effectively enact social change requires deeper pockets of understanding because each social group must be affected in an organic, authentic fashion that respects the group's lived experience (c.f., hooks, 1994, and Ransby, 2002). The task for me then is not to find generalizable, top-level policies or guidelines for how to structure a group nor to paint a general portrait of what gamers are like, but rather to find generalizable processes for discovering the guidelines to use in micro settings and speak about specific gamers within my personal social circle (c.f., Vargas, 2006, on how he wrote about the people and events around him).

It can take several months for forty players to learn how to clear a high-end dungeon in *World of Warcraft (WoW)* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004a). After successfully clearing the dungeon, the group would continue to visit the dungeon every week for the equipment and treasure gained after killing the monsters within. Certain "boss" monsters drop one or two random rare items when killed. Most of the time, these rare items can only be obtained from these specific monsters. This means that for all forty players to receive the items they desire, the group must clear the dungeon over and over again. When a particular item drops—a more effective sword, say—multiple players may want a chance at receiving the item. Many ways of dividing the loot have risen out of these game mechanics driven situations, but the loot system used by a particular group is often a testament to the general social and political structure of the group. In other words, the mechanics of raiding for scarce rewards set the stage for emergent loot rules based on the social realities of a particular raid group. Some raid groups, for example, use the common DKP system (Wikipedia, 2007) where players accrue points for weekly

attendance and participating in killing certain monsters. When an item they want drops, players bid on it using the points they've accrued. This system is highly individualistic, serving to emphasize competition among raid members and encouraging players to leave the group once they've received the items they desire. Another way of considering who should receive an item is to look at the overall benefit of the group, maximizing the effectiveness of the raid by allocating loot to whomever would make the raid most efficient. For example, the sword should be given to whoever would use it the most during the activities of the raid group. This method of dividing the loot items attempts to shorten the time it takes for all members of the raid group to receive what they desire and works under the assumption that those who receive items early-on stay in the group until everyone has benefited from membership. The social conditions needed for this assumption to exist indicate high trust among group members. This only exists, from what I've seen, when raid groups are composed of players with existing bonds and strong friendships (Chen, in review).

Viewing the division of loot as an individual-versus-group scenario helps us consider it as an example of what economic and political game theorists call a "social dilemma" (Hardin, 1968, Axelrod, 1985, and Felkins, 2001) where individual incentives are in tension with group benefits. The biggest problem I encountered when I attempted to use game theory models to look at player behavior was that the players were not "rational" actors in the game theory sense where decisions are based on incentives and rewards. Instead, they functioned as members of a historical group with dynamic sociopolitical relationships among group members (Galarneau & Chen, in press). These relationships played a tremendous impact on the players' shared understanding of group norms, and many players simply followed established norms rather than making individual choices.

My experiences in *World of Warcraft* give me a particular understanding of certain players and their motivations that game theory models could not possibly account for. As models they are useful to understand broad frameworks for viewing situations but are relatively ineffective in understanding how to enact social change on the ground level. Two years ago, I had planned to eventually do an intervention with the group of gamers I played with. I kept delaying anything above active participation, however, because any attempts to introduce them to social dilemma and academic literature felt unauthentic. It felt like an outside imposition to bring in outside abstract theory. I still do not have a good answer with regards to enacting theory into practice, and the writings of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and others I've read recently are inspiring and helpful but still leave me constantly struggling with the idea of "pushing from the inside." The new practices a particular group must learn to work more effectively must emerge from a site-specific, shared understanding among group members. What I'm arguing for, then, is a merging of traditional ethnographic practices as applied to games (c.f., Steinkuehler, 2004, Taylor, 2006, and Hayano, 1982) and organic action (c.f., hooks, 1994, Freire, 1970, Ransby, 2002, and Vargas, 2006).

Research Questions

My overall questions are:

1. How do *World of Warcraft* players (who I play with) communicate and learn to work as a team?
2. What kinds of social structures exist between these players and how do these affect their behavior?
3. How might certain players be marginalized or silenced by a dominant culture within the group?

Naturally, as an active participant, the groups of players I look at come from my personal social networks in the game. A unique opportunity has presented itself to me from this participation. A group of players I know works together in the same technical support department for a large corporation. A cross-setting comparison between their gaming teamwork and their workplace teamwork could be fruitful and leads to the question:

4. What kinds of comparisons can be made between working as a team in a corporate environment and working as a team in-game?

What follows is a brief overview of how *World of Warcraft*, as a game, works before I describe an ethnographic research design looking at the experiences of a specific group of players.

A World of Warcraft primer

Following a long tradition of role-playing games, *World of Warcraft* players create a character to control in a virtual fantasy world full of dangerous monsters, exotic locations, and people who need help (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004b). Each player chooses a type of character class to play (e.g., a brawny warrior, a backstabbing rogue, a devout healer) and the race of their character (e.g., orc, human, night-elf) that in turn determines which of the two opposing factions his or her character is aligned with (Alliance or Horde). As a player journeys through the land with his or her character, completing quests and defeating monsters, the character accrues “experience points” or “XP.” After a certain amount of XP, the character advances an “experience level” and becomes more powerful. Additionally, the corpses of monsters that are defeated can be looted for valuable items (known as “loot”) that may help characters outfit themselves and be better prepared for future encounters. Characters start out at level one and can (currently) advance to level 70. Many of the in-game encounters are designed to be challenging

for teams of players rather than individual players. As such, they are too difficult for a single player to attempt, but they also offer up more rewarding loot.

To team up, the character joins a “party,” a group of up to five characters. Generally, the party goes to the same places and works on the same quests together. Some of the dungeons are designed for multiple parties joined together as a raid group. Previously, raid content was limited to dungeons designed for forty players. Many of the newer raid dungeons are set for ten or twenty-five people. For some of the encounters a group will face, it is important to compose the party or raid with favorable proportions of the different character classes. For example, it is often necessary to have a warrior in the party to take the brunt of the blows from the monsters since a warrior has high stamina and is allowed by the game to wear plate armor, and it is also important to have someone who can heal the other party members when they take damage. Some encounters are much easier with certain group compositions. This is especially true in a raid attempting to clear a high-end dungeon.

Often a character is invited or allowed to join a raid group only if he or she meets the raid’s requirements in terms of his or her character class in relation to the existing composition of the raid. This works under the assumption that the player is skilled and familiar with the game mechanics to play effectively. It is not the only factor, however. Generally, preference is given to friends or at least non-strangers who meet the class requirement. In this way, the roles players assume are as much determined by their character classes and personal skills as by their social relations to the other players and their ability to argue for certain ways of playing.

More permanent groups called "guilds" can be formed among players. These are affiliations that persist across game sessions and allow communication between players of the same guild even if they are not currently in the same parties. Many players seem to conflate

guilds and raid groups, assuming raid members are always composed of players from the same guild. This assumption exists in part because some of the more driven raid groups are made up of guilds that have identified themselves as "hard-core raiding guilds." There are many other types of guilds, however, including "family-friendly" ones that emphasize shared experiences and positive environments and "role-playing" guilds that emphasize players *acting* as the characters they control and staying "in character."

Design: Cross-setting Ethnography

Settings and themes

Before the expansion *The Burning Crusade* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2007) came out, players who had reached the level cap most often continued playing the game only if they could participate in high-end raids. These were forty person affairs that rewarded players with better equipment than previously available. The equipment a particular character had acquired was a large factor in how powerful the character was. Improvements to characters' effectiveness across a whole raid group meant that the group could go to more difficult dungeons for a chance at even better equipment. Most raid groups were relatively stable, but some players definitely joined and left raids as their characters improved, moving on to more mature raid groups for the more rewarding equipment in the harder dungeons. Many players were left out of raiding altogether, though, since the actual act of participating in a group often meant spending at least fifteen hours a week in the game, sometimes playing for five or six hours per session, and this fact meant that many raid groups had a stable membership, so it was difficult for a single player to gain access to a raid. Additionally, certain classes were more popular than others, so sometimes even if a raid

had open spots, particular players could not join because their characters could not fill the right role.

Blizzard, the game developers, attempted to make *The Burning Crusade's* new dungeons more accessible by less "hardcore" players. They did this by lowering the number of people required for a raid and included content that doesn't require a raid group. The first big raid dungeon is known as Karazhan and is designed for ten people. The problem with this strategy is that it assumes people raid for loot when, in actuality, the raid groups I participated in valued the act of raiding itself as a way to spend time with friends. The change to the requirements for high-end content actually severed many relationships that were established through raiding forty-person dungeons. Separate mini-groups started experiencing the new dungeons in parallel, but many of them became more and more insular. This was especially true for raid groups that were made up of members from many different guilds. Players tended to explore the new five and ten-person dungeons as intra-guild groups because it was easier for a player attempting to organize a group to communicate within a guild than across guilds. Even within a guild, different players who once raided together are now being stratified into sub-groups who progress through the game's content at different paces.

One of the conditions of the server I play on is that the Horde-side pool of players who raid is relatively small. This means that new raiding groups are finding it difficult to build a sustained core of players if they cannot find the right class balance within their guild. Part of the problem, however, is that multiple groups across multiple guilds are attempting to form without enough communication among the players in these groups. It is possible that certain half-formed groups could merge and successfully raid together. In other words, one possible solution to this problem is some sort of group-level matchmaking service. This solution might also serve to

keep track of the progress of the separate groups engaged in raid activities. This would be helpful because, eventually, players will want to take their characters to dungeons that require more than ten people. These dungeons require well-gearred characters; it is assumed characters get this gear from Karazhan and the five-person dungeons.

These problems on our server and the conditions of our friendship-valued raids set the stage for specific strategies for managing and organizing different raid teams.

About a dozen players work together in the internal, technical support department for a large insurance company in Northeastern Pennsylvania. From informal talks with some of them, I understand that some of them work closely as sub-teams within the larger team. I believe most of them have college degrees from a local university or state school. I have also learned that despite having been in the workforce for some time—most of them are in their late twenties or early thirties—quite a few of them have not strayed far from their childhood homes. In fact, some of them rent rooms in their parents' homes.

Initially, I wanted to see the different dynamics at play between the same players in different settings. What made this interesting was that the manager of the workplace team was considered a novice in the game because he started playing much later than the rest of the team. Unfortunately, he has since moved to a different department and no longer manages the team out-of-game. It would still be interesting to look at how the players who work together interact and draw similarities and differences to the way they work together in the game.

To do this comparison, I would need to watch this group of players/co-workers playing and working. This means visiting them at work and observing the way in which they communicate and organize in that setting as well as observing their online teamwork strategies. I would also like to make home visits, especially when some of the co-workers have LAN parties

on certain weekends. I think aspects of their behavior might be made clearer if I were to watch them "live" in addition to watching their characters' actions.

Access strategy

In the game, these players and I are part of the same guild. We have played with each other on numerous occasions and we consider each other friends. Legitimate access to them in the game would be easy. The limiting factor would be that, for many in-game activities, only five or sometimes ten people may participate. The activities for larger groups are relatively inaccessible due to item requirements needed to participate in those activities. To mitigate this, I would have to attempt to participate with different combinations of players each gaming session. It could be that certain behaviors only manifest themselves among certain players.

Outside of the game, I would want access to their workplace and would need permission from their employer. The players I've talked to indicate that this would not be a problem, but I have not yet attempted to gain permission. For home visits, I'd like to make sure all the household members have given me permission to be an observer in their home, but I do not foresee any problems in making these site visits.

Data collection

As with my previous *WoW* research (Chen, in review), I would be recording text chat among group members using an in-game "addon" that writes the text to external text files. The text chat is divided into different channels that players may individually subscribe to. Many of these channels are role-specific. For example, all the healers of a raid group might have a special channel reserved for the coordination talk needed to heal the group. During certain boss

encounters, I would also video record what happens on-screen to get a sense of the in-game events that the players talk about.

In addition to in-game recordings, I would take field notes of the workplace observations. I think audio and video recording the workplace might be too cumbersome and logistically very difficult to record possibly spontaneous interactions over an eight-hour day. Rather, I plan to job shadow various members of the team and write down anything that catches my attention. I imagine the act of collecting field data will become more productive as I learn good processes to follow.

For home visits, I believe I could set up video or audio recorders for specific gaming sessions. It might be interesting to do a parallel comparison between in-game text chat transcripts and video or audio transcripts of live playing sessions.

A common practice among these players is to talk about game experiences in online discussion boards, so I plan to look at their posts as another way to understand how *they* understand their game playing. Finally, one of the limits of my previous research was that I went by observation (and participation) alone. Future research will include interview data so that I can ask direct questions on how players think about cooperation, teamwork, coordination, communication, and social and power relationships. I want to ground the interview questions on specific instances that I observe, and, as such, I don't have an exact sense of what the questions would look like.

I believe capturing parallel data for two months would be enough to see multiple gaming sessions and combinations of different party compositions and the in-between talk that happens outside of those sessions. I predict much of the talk would be centered around different

strategies to try out on a boss until successful. I also want to see if any salient problems in their work lives appear so I can compare how they talk about work to how they talk about raiding.

Analysis

I have several agendas I want to pursue as I analyze future data. One of them is to attempt to identify patterns of interactions among group members and see if these patterns can map onto the idea of units (Bogost, 2006) within a system. It may well be, however, that I will need to use a different framework to try to understand the emergent patterns (e.g., Nardi, Whittaker, & Schwarz, 2002, for activity theory, Stevens, 2000, and Strauss, 1985, for divisions of labor and situated cognition). I also want to pay close attention to the power dynamics between group members by making a critical read of how they communicate with one another. I suspect I'll find that certain members of the group speak less than others and that this will be related to the roles they play in the group rather than attributable to personality types (e.g., "shyness"). This will include frequency of interactions as well as initiation of talk and kinds of talk. I have not yet decided whether I will code the separate lines of interaction or try an overall analysis by threaded topic instead.

Optional

One idea I might attempt to pursue on top of the proposed ethnography is to collaboratively create a web tool or process for organizing and communicating. Players could track the progress of the different raid groups and overall progress of a larger player base. They could identify which teams need help and which might be ready for larger dungeons. This might be a way for me to organically help my social group to better understand the relationships

between individual players and a larger social order. I need to talk to other players and see if a joint venture could be sustainable before I pursue this further.

Table 1: Comparison between previous *WoW* study and proposed study.

Design element	Old Design	New Design
Setting	high-end raid, activities in one dungeon	off-screen insurance company employees' homes and job site, individual player activities
Themes	Communication and coordination during raids	Communication and coordination on and off-screen
Access strategy	Existing member of raid	Existing member of guild; would need permission from company
Nature of data	In-game text and voice chat, forum posts	In-game text and voice chat, forum posts, off-screen dialogs, live and IM interviews
Data collection period	One month	Two months
Analysis	Translate and generalize chat, focus on threads that may span multiple chat channels and trust-based coordination	Parallel graphs of interactions and types of interaction to see if there is correlation (based on swift trust notion), identify processes for teamwork, compare off-screen practice with in-game practice

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