Social Expectations in the Virtual World

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Introduction

While the virtual world in the game *World of Warcraft* may be based in fantasy, the interactions of it's players follow many of the same social rules and norms that people do in real life. Just like in real life, many of these rules are unspoken, but socially expected. In real life, when these rules are violated, people are often uncomfortable, or offended. Research into social norms in virtual worlds suggests that the same reactions may occur in the virtual world as well.

In a study by Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, and Merget, "The Unbearable Likeness of Being Digital: The Persistence of Nonverbal Social Norms in Online Virtual Environments," the authors suggested that there are persistent non-verbal social norms in both the real world and the virtual world. One such social norm is personal space. It would be uncomfortable for us in real life if someone stood too close to us.

There are also laws that govern some social laws in the real world- for instance you could not follow someone around for hours without saying anything or you would most likely end up in jail. However, in *World of Warcraft* there are no such rules to govern this kind of contact in place. Nevertheless, the expectation to follow real life social expectations on behavior and courtesy may still be pertinent.

In an attempt to violate one of these social norms, I used the "/follow" command in game to follow a character around for no apparently reason for a period of 30 minutes. In real life, this behavior would violate many social norms and expectations, such as personal space, privacy, as well as general courteously. This is not "normal" behavior in the real world or in-game, and as the result I believe it will provoke an in-game response.

While group questing is common, it is not a common behavior to be very close to

someone in-game when not in a group or sharing a common goal. When questing, players join a group in order to share experience and loot. However, when not in a group, players are unable to work together to kill monsters and share experience. Because of this, many players may interpret the presence of another player threatening. "Kill stealing" is a common, but frowned upon behavior of stealing experience from another player. This occurs when one player attacks the targeted enemy of another player so that he or she reaps the experience, for killing an enemy, which they did not have to fight. This could lead to players being apprehensive of another player being close by.

Personal space may exist in the virtual world as well. While players are fine being around others in confined spaces such as Ogrimmer or other major cities, it is unusual to be in very close proximity to a non-party member in the general world. As the result, i expect many players to become uncomfortable with me doing this. I expect that many will demand an explanation, or attempt to get me stuck on things, or make me go in circles in order to "mess" with me.

There are many other social norms which could be interesting to study further, however a problem with these is that many would get banned from the game by it's developers, Blizzard Entertainment. Whether these norms are the result of Blizzard's rules or an actuation of the players own desires for reflection of society, there are strict codes of player conduct, which forbid sexual harassment, derogatory language, racism, and offensive speech.

University of Wisconsin Professor Constance Steinkuehler suggests that virtual worlds, may teach real world lessons on social norms. She says, they "push social norms and practices because those things are necessary to succeed at highly complex MMOGs

like World of Warcraft"(Richgels, 2009). It is clear that there are social norms in World of Warcraft, but what causes them, and whether they mimic real life society or a created from the game is an intriguing question.

In this research I hope to determine if the real life social norm of personal space applies to the virtual world as well. There are no guidelines from Blizzard or in game development that prohibits one from being at a close proximity to another player and nothing stopping one from doing so from a game play standpoint. However, I believe that players will have a social expectation that other players follow this social code of conduct.

Methods

In order to study the effect of breaking a nonverbal social norm, I found players who were going about their business and used the "/follow" command to follow them at a close distance. I would then make qualitative observations of their behavior. I would pay special attention to behavior that seemed to be a direct result of my actions, which may come across as unusual in-game.

I followed twenty different characters for twenty minutes each, or until I was unable to follow them due to the player logging out or using other forms of travel. During this time, I made careful qualitative observations about their behavior and actions, while not interfering with them, or interacting with them in any way. When I was spoken to, or asked a question through the in-game chat feature, I did not respond.

In order to accurately record any in-game communication the player might attempt with me, I enabled the chat log in-game, which saves a text document of all conversations to a .txt file in the game directory. It also records player name, date and time, for more

accurate reporting of events. This allows for later analysis, and comparison with

observational data.

Because of the ability for players above level 30 to use a "mount" which is an item

that would allow them to travel faster, making them harder to follow, I chose to observe

subjects that were level 29 and below. My own character, being above level 30, was able

to travel faster with his mount. Because of this, I was able to follow players more easily,

and in the event I fell behind was able to catch up to them quickly.

In order to record my observations of the players, I enabled windowed mode in the

game settings, which allows me to change the size of the *World of Warcraft* game

window, and quickly and easily switch between the game and other programs. I would

also have a text editor open, which I would use to record the player's level, name, and

then qualitative observational data on their behavior, including times for all activities.

Figure 1, Example of Observational Data
Started Following level 12 Warlock Quinzul at 11:38 outside of Crossroads Inn 11:29 Player headed away from Inn -turned around in my direction, then jumped back and forth around me 11:29 Changed direction towards Inn. -Jumped on mailbox -Jumped back and forth over it 4 times until I was stuck on the opposite side as him -stopped jumping. 11:40 Jumped on top of the mailbox and repeatedly jumped on circles on top of it, while I remained on the ground beside it. 11:41 Continued to Jump in circles on top of mailbox 11:42 Started running north away from Crossroads 11;43 Stopped to gather Peacebloom 11:44 Attacks 3 Plainstriders, level 12, at once 11:44 Dies- I wait by his body 11:45 Respawns 11:46 Sits down, drinks 11:48 Attacks Plainstrider, kills and appears to loot it. 11:49 Attacks the next nearest Plainstrider, kills, loots it.

Results

Out of the 20 people I followed, there were many common behaviors. First, many went over or around obstacles, even when they did not appear to be on their original path. Due to the nature of the "/follow" command, by going over roots or other environmental features which requires a player to jump, I, as a follower, would be temporarily stuck behind a root and they would often gain distance ahead of me. One such player went around a tree, which caused me to momentarily stop running after him or her or her during which time they were able to increase the distance between us. After I caught up to him or her and was able to use the follow command again, he or she ran up a large hill, which was difficult for me to climb. I fell several times, during which he or she ran over the top to the opposite side. This caused me to lose sight of him until I was able to find a path up. I then again caught back up to him or her, and resumed following him. When I reached him or her again the player said "wtf!" which is an Internet acronym for "what the fuck!"

This player demonstrated a second common behavior I observed- communication. Many players tried to communicate verbally with me via the game's text based chat feature. This player's statement, "wtf," was one of the most common questions or statements I received. Many players displayed a puzzled, inquisitive, and disconcerted demeanor towards me, and my behavior. They all appeared inquisitive about me and or my behavior. Almost all players who spoke to me used question marks, or made questioning statements. They seemed to ask questions like "what" and/or "???" and "wtf?"

A particular case I found very interesting was a level 16 Warrior, who I began following as he left a city called Crossroads, a major travel hub. Within a minute of me following the player, he or she said to me "?" then 2 minutes later another inquisitive "what???" After I gave no response and kept following he or she jumped back and forth around me, causing my character to repeatedly change directions, and walked backwards jumping up and down. After more two minutes, when I had not responded and was still following him the player said "suck me" and then "lol" which is an online abbreviation for "laugh out loud." I followed the player as he or she left Crossroads and began killing nearby Plainstriders. After five more minutes he or she said, "what u need?" "a guild?". Thirty seconds after that he or she again questioned me, "gold?" The player then jumped around me for a minute, at which point he or she no longer attempted any communication, and went about killing more Plainstriders. He or she then returned to the Crossroads without appearing to pay any more attention to me, and did not jump up and down, or turn around and face my direction.

This player also showed a third common behavior, which usually occurred within the first minute of my following a player. This is the act of turning around in my direction, or appearing to look at me. This combined with walking backwards facing me, seemed to be an almost universal response. Many of the players would then proceed to jump up and down, many times over or around me in circles. This behavior was exhibited by all of the subjects except two, who both showed no discernable reaction.

Lastly, a fourth common behavior I observed was that many players used travel or logged out while I was following them. Many of my observations ended prematurely before the full twenty minutes of my intended observational period due to in-game travel

or player log-out. A player can talk to a "Griffin Master" which are located at various cities in the game, and travel via a flying creature at an accelerated rate to previously visited places. This action ends the "/follow" command, and makes it impossible for me to tell where the player the player is going, effectively cutting off my observation of that particular player. Deviel, a level 7 Mage I followed around the Crossroads, which is a city in a relatively low level area- was one such player who used travel. After going around the city and appearing to talk to several non-human characters, he or she then walked backwards and jumped up and down, and ran in circles around me. The player then ran to the Griffin Master, and flew away.

Another travel method that disrupted my observation was the use of a "hearthstone." A hearthstone is an item which warps the caster back to his or her "home" location. This is a pre-set destination, and can be set to any location, any distance away. A level 24 Priest Sargentinto was one player who used this travel method. When I started following they player he or she left the Crossroads and walked backwards, looking in my direction, for several seconds. The player then killed two beasts, and turned around, appearing to look in my direction again. He or she then walked for 3 seconds before again turning around in my direction. He then stopped running, and used the hearthstone, causing me to be unable to follow him any longer, and ending my observation.

Discussion

Significance

I believe that most of the common behaviors I observed in these players were in direct response to my behavior. The first commonality I noted, going around/through obstacles, I believe was done solely because of my presence. Many players seemed to

alter their path, going out of their way to find obstructions. I believe that these players navigated difficult paths intentionally, because of my use of the follow command, in order to try to get me stuck so I fell behind and stopped following them. The player who climbed the hill for instance I believe did so for the sole purpose of getting rid of me, which he was temporarily successful in doing. This conclusion is supported by the player saying, "get the fuck out of here" when I resumed following him again.

The next common behavior, communication, I found most revealing about the players attitudes. There were three major patterns in their communication. First, as discussed earlier, almost all players made questioning statements. It was clear from conversation that these players seemed to desire an explanation of my behavior. Inquisitive statements such as "???" and "what???" seem to imply that players want to know why I was acting this way, why I was following them. The level 16 Warrior in particular seemed very curious about my behavior. He seemed to think that I was following him because I wanted something. When I did not respond, he began guessing that I followed him because I wanted to be invited to a guild. When I still didn't respond, he made another guess that I wanted Gold, or in-game currency.

The second pattern in the player's communication was the use of vulgar language and insults. 7 out of the 20 players I followed insulted or swore at me. Examples include the level 16 Warrior saying "suck me" to a level 15 mage saying "Get the fuck out of here." The use of this language seems to show that not only was my behavior unusual and puzzling, but it was also upsetting. It seems that these players found my close presence uncomfortable, and possibly rude. They seemed to want me to leave them alone, even

though for all intents and purposes of the game I was not interfering with their game play in any way.

The third pattern in player's communication was the use of statements, expressing their confusion and suprise about my odd behavior. Statements such as "wtf" and "lol" may express uneasiness with my behavior. These players seemed both puzzled and upset with my unexplained behavior.

Players jumping up and down and walking backwards facing me were by far the most common behaviors I observed. These actions occurred most often together, usually within a short time of following them. I believe that the players run backwards in order to see me and/or determine if I am still following them, or perhaps just running in a similar direction. Another reason for the players to do this may have been to determine my level, either to satisfy curiosity or for possible group cooperation. There could be many possible motives for jumping up and down. It could be meant as an attention getter. Possibly to alert me that I was following them, in case I had done so by accident and was unaware. It also could possibly be simply to annoy me so I would leave. However, it could also have no significance, and may reflect a player's boredom, or their enjoyment of jumping up and down with their character in a virtual world.

Lastly, the fact that many players used a hearthstone, or flight point while I was following them may also suggest that they were uncomfortable with my behavior. While it can not be absolutely determined through observation, I believe that at least some of these players used Griffin Master or hearthstone in order to "escape" or get away from me. The level 24 Priest discussed earlier for example, turned around several times to face me, while going about his tasks, which I interpret as him checking to see if I was still

there. Before using the hearthstone, he turned around and looked at me, ran, and then turned around and looked at me again before using the hearthstone. This behavior shows that he y noticed my presence, and the fact that he repeatedly interrupted other tasks to turn in my direction may indicate that he was uncomfortable with my presence. This could be a motive for his use of the hearthstone, to get away from me.

Implications

This study has several implications on society as a whole as videogame players. The fact that there was an overwhelming negative reaction to my violation of a real-life social norm, despite it not interfering with the player's in-game activities or success, suggests that the players apply the social norms of the real world to the virtual as well. In this particular case, the norm I was in clear violation of was personal space. Just as it would be unusual and bothersome for a person to stand too close to you in real life, it was also upsetting when this occurred in the virtual world as well. Even the reactions of players were similar to what one would expect someone to say in real life as well "what the fuck" or "what do you want" would not be that out of line if a stranger were to stand within our boundary of personal space. The players' adherence to a social norm which has no in-game enforcement, such as through in-game rules made by Blizzard, also shows that these rules are self-imposed by the players.

The study has implications for the average *World of Warcraft* player as well. As this study suggests, even though there may be less repercussions for breaking a social norm in World of Warcraft than in real life, there are still expectations of conduct within the game. The significance of this is that if one ignores real life social norms in the game, they may find themselves at odds with other players. This could lead to difficulties

working together in groups, as other players may find your presence uncomfortable or upsetting if you fail to abide by their view of acceptable behavior.

Limitations

There are several limitations to my study. First, through observation alone it is impossible to conclusively determine players' motives. When observing behavior, it is particularly hard to tell what is a reaction to my own behavior and what is normal behavior. Particularly in cases when the player did not attempt to speak to me, it was hard to analyze their actions, and determine their attitude towards my behavior.

Due to the limited number of subjects observed, the study represents only a very small portion of the 11.5 million current *World of Warcraft* subscribers (Blizzard). As the result, recreating this experiment at a much larger scale could yield vastly different results. A larger scale study could contradict these findings and find that the vast majority of it's subjects did not react, and did not get upset by having another character follow them around.

Lastly, the person behind the computer can not be accounted for. This has very large bearing on the study, and could have a significant effect on the results. Experience with the game, gender, culture, location, race and religion are just a few examples of other factors that were not accounted for. Social norms for instance are vastly different between cultures and continents. As the result, a player may react differently depending on the their cultural upbringing. Age of the subject may also have a significant effect on the results. For instance a 14 year-old boy may interact with people in a virtual world much differently than a 45 year-old woman.

Lastly, while personal space seems to be the social norm that was violated, it is unclear if it was personal space alone that was violated or if other in-game or real world social norms were violated as well. As stated by international political advisor Alli Fisher, "Each community, particularly online, has its own cultural and social expectations. To be able to engage successfully, the international actor has to navigate not just the practical barriers, but also these cultural and social barriers." (Fisher, Brockerhoff, 2008). While she may be referring to communicating online for business and political reasons, these same barriers exist in *World of Warcraft*'s online community as well. There are plenty of social norms to violate, whether cultural or in-game. As the result, it is difficult to tell specifically which one or ones are being violated.

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