

Social Interaction Design in MMOs

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Abstract:

This chapter discusses logics of design implemented within MMO's to support social interaction. First we try to understand how designers attract players to games that request constant collaboration and cooperation actions to play and progress, and then how do they maintain the interest throughout playing. For the first question we discuss in depth the design for social interdependency, as for the second, we present a study on persuasion techniques used in the design of social game mechanics. We've used *World of Warcraft* as our main case study.

Key words: game design, social interaction, MMO, persuasion, interdependency

1. Introduction

Games are inherently of social nature. Chess or checkers were designed to be experienced not only with the game itself, but also with others. On the other hand, videogames are inherently of solitary nature. Since the beginning, the story of games was attached to the specificity of putting the machine in the place of the opponent. A.S. Douglas PhD thesis on Human-Machine Interaction (1954) at the University of Cambridge was to prove that he could build an algorithm that would be able to respond as a human-to-human play¹. Or even Pong, the beauty of it was that we could be alone at home and still play the game against the machine.

The question raised is, what is more rewarding to the user? We've seen from the current trends in videogames that the social has never been vanished, and more than ever videogames use the social as condition to sell. Starting with MUDs, then MMOs and more recently Social Games, online games were able to bring the social into the equation again – even more so than before.

Therefore studying MMOs means studying social aspects of games, aspects as “human attachment” (Bowlby, 1969:39) or in a broader sense, how communities are built. Mammalian babies would not survive without strong attachment with parents, which feel in return the need to protect and take care, a process of basic bonding. As most studies in Positive Psychology demonstrate, millennia of evolution took us to feel the most rewarded through doing good to others (Sheldon e Lyubomirsky, 2004). This takes us to the main question about what generates groups and communities, and why do they stay together? The answers are in survival, the group is a condition to survive for mammals, and we can say that the energy to propel grouping comes from the actions of interdependence between members of a group.

Consequently interdependence must be the main reason for action, and so the main design concern in any social game. On the other side social relations created from interdependent actions are mostly

¹ The project output from this PhD was the first known computer game of the history, *Noughts and Crosses* (1952), which ran in the Britannic electronic computer ESDAC.

purposeful, not strong enough to create in depth socialization. Designers need to convince players to invest in social relations, because game success is dependent not on interdependency, but on the interest of players in coming back to continue playing with others. Hence why should people socialize with other players, having to deal with all human complexities and problems, only to progress in a game? The answer is in the MMOs game design, which uses as ground design basic techniques of social persuasion. To define these techniques, we've used the work done by Cialdini (2001) on influence. He argues that humans use shortcuts to analyze the world around, to help coping with relations, and that some of these shortcuts can be traced as patterns. These human behavioral-patterns are able to evoke in each of us non-conscious automatic responses. These automatic responses are fruit of millennia of evolution created by real causes with real impacts in us, and so they generated in our brains a strong framework for action toward others, our socializing brain.

2. Interdependency

"Without community, you simply have a bunch of independent players running around the same environment. Players won't drawn in and there won't be anything there to bind them. The key to creating community, therefore, is interdependence" (Braid McQuaid, *Everquest* designer, quoted according to Aihoshi, 2000)

Research has defended that social interaction is the main driving force for gamers to continue playing MMOs (Griffiths, 2003) or Social Games (Zagalo, 2012). In games like Chess or Pong social interaction introduces emotions of a second person in game and raises sentiments towards the game not achievable against a machine. But we're playing against the other person, there's no cooperation or collaboration, hence the design only need to take into account one person needs at a time. On the other side are multiplayer games with cooperative goals, as MMOs and Social Games.

Interdependence is a relationship in which each member is mutually dependent on the other, thus we can say that it represents a vital condition for the creation of cooperative action. Players perceive game missions and goals as only reachable when helping and being helped by others. Situations of helping/helped are then responsible for generating the greatest moments of social interaction in-game, and this is why we need to first understand what interdependence is, why it occurs and how is it represented in-game. Kelley and Thibaut (1978) devised theories on interdependence describing the process as a relation between reward and costs, where rewards would be gratification and pleasure, while costs would be loss and punishment. Rewards and costs can be seen as the positive and negative impacts from an interdependent relation. Kelley and Thibaut then defined four specific types of rewards and costs: emotional, social, instrumental, and opportunity. We will focus on the example of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, since it is one of the biggest and well-known MMO games on the market. We will also focus our attention more on the most dedicated and faithful part of the community, which refers to players in maximum level, raiders and PvPers².

² Raiding is a type of missions in which a very large number of players get together to fight against AI controlled monsters (or Bosses) that require coordination and strategic planning and execution to defeat. PvP is a gaming term that refers to "player versus player" modes. In the case of MMOs, the PvP works has "groups versus groups" and can vary between small teams in an arena, to 40 man battles in a huge battleground.

Starting with the “emotional” type, we got the positive and negative feelings resulting from a relationship, that affects us more the closer the relationship is. Any social game is more than just a game; it’s a community, with all the human relationships and emotions that come with it, respect, dislike, jealousy, compassion, admiration, and so on. In MMO games, players normally have several circles of friendships within the game community. It’s true that most of the relationships are based on functional and instrumental interests, the twenty five man raiding group, the player that exchanges materials with us for a certain profession or the person who organizes groups in trade chat on Sundays. But as in every social space, we form emotional bonds with the ones who interact and relate more. The reward that comes from an emotional bound in a MMO is not much different from a real life relation. The joy of helping a friend against a common threat, or just sharing everyday experiences on voice chat, building trust which is the main pillar of friendship. It comes with costs as well, and if losing a friend that we only casually play with can be hard, losing a close friend because he’s leaving the game for example, can be as though as having a “real” friend leaving the country.

In the “social” type, we have a person’s social appearance and the ability to interact in social environments. Rewards come from the positive aspect of a person’s social appearance and the enjoyable social situations in which he can engage. In fantasy MMO’s like *World of Warcraft*, the social appearance of a player is defined by his avatar. This includes things like genre and race, but most importantly, the equipment, titles, and visible guild tab. Having the best equipment or the best title represents status within the game world, and high status is rewarding by nature. By looking at someone’s appearance, a player can have a clear idea of someone’s skill and experience with the game.

In *World of Warcraft*, there are several objectives that require cooperative play to tackle; some of them require the participation of up to 25 players at the same time, and through various game sessions. To support this, the game features a system to form organized groups known as guilds. Designers also introduced a system to support these groups, by allowing guild leaders to search for suitable recruits in game, and for a solo player to find a guild that meets his interests. Usually the most successful guilds have very tough criteria to accept new members, and through the achievement system³, a guild leader can easily confirm a character experience in the game. This makes working on social appearance one of the first priorities for players that wishes to try out real end game content and apply to a better guild. A player is also expected to behave accordingly to the group rules, especially in a guild and especially during trial period⁴. Being polite and willing to learn will often improve the chances of permanent membership and will also increase the opportunity to be part of guild made groups. Even if the player is not particularly skillful with the game, being able to interact properly in this social environment can improve his status within it.

On the costs side, like in every RPG, equipment is essential in *World of Warcraft*. The very game system is designed to cut of players from some content if they don’t have the required global item

³ Achievements are rewards in the form of points, granted each time a player finishes an objective.

⁴ Before being accepted has full members, players usually need to go through a trial period when they need to prove their value has a player.

level. Also even in groups formed by strangers (PUG's⁵), players often ask for the item level value of others, and tend to neglect the ones that have poor equipment.

For the “*instrumental*” type, rewards and costs deal with activities and tasks in a relationship. Rewards are obtained when a person's partner is skillful in conducting tasks, like taking good care of kids or gaining enough money to pay bills. On the other side costs occur when a partner causes unnecessary work or the partner impedes the other's progress in a task. There are several reward systems in *World of Warcraft*, some require time dedication, and others depend on the individual skill with the game. Whatever the kind of reward is, the best ones are only obtainable with the help of others. Being a raid group, a group quest or a battleground, not only a group needs enough numbers to succeed, but the game also features a variety of mechanics where the player needs to fulfill his task properly or there is a chance of failure to the group as a whole. This is known as synchronous gameplay, where interactions occur simultaneously in real time between various players.

The very core of the combat system on *World of Warcraft* known as Trinity is also the most interdependent structure of the game. Trinity is a group of player classes, where each one performs a different role - Tank, Healer and DPS (damage dealer) - Tanks can mitigate incoming damage from enemies, healers restore damage done to team members, and DPS classes do damage to enemies. Depending on the fight and how the damage is handled, being able to properly conduct his task and role will reward a player with a spot in good groups.

There is something crucial for a guild dedicated to PvE (player versus environment) within an MMO, the progress. It is the main factor of competition in *WoW*, both in a global scale, server level and individual level. The progress is measured by which bosses were defeated by a guild, and by who defeated them first. This makes group leaders to tend and favor the best players for a spot in a group, despite the fact that it might be another player that deserves a chance by behaving perfectly.

This way, the skill of a player in conducting tasks is more important once he reaches a certain level of the game. Costs can occur both when a player is skillful or non-skillful with a particular task. Let's take an example of a fight where only three players of a guild are capable of conducting a certain task in a fight. There is a cost to others that are not able to do it because they won't even be given a chance to try and do so, and there is also a cost for those three because they will be destined to do it over and over again, even if they don't need any of the rewards of that fight.

Finally “*opportunity*” rewards are those gains that come from being together in a relationship with a partner. Costs occur when a person must give up something that they normally would not for the sake of the relationship. Being a member of a good guild allows a player to reach a certain kind of content that would be inaccessible otherwise. Being a friend with a member of a good guild can also get a player to experience content that he otherwise wouldn't be able to. If a guild group is short on numbers, it's typical to fill out the group with a friend of one of the members, which then can be practically carried out by the other members on very hard bosses, but reach the same kind of rewards and achievements.

Costs refer to what is expected from players within the guild. Members are requested to respect a schedule, to be available certain days of the week, and even to contribute with materials the guild

⁵ PUGs is abbreviation for Pickup Group, a term used commonly in MMORPGs to identify groups that aren't formed by people that know each other.

needs every week. Usually the responsibilities are corresponding to the rank within the guild, which grants a member different permissions, from talking in chat or even to be able to remove another member from the guild.

To conclude, interdependence results in quantifying outcomes and these are determined to be positive when the rewards outweigh the costs in a relationship, and negative if the opposite.

3. Persuasion

The interdependency is really the main factor to oblige players to interact and cooperate; however it's not sufficient to maintain players engaged throughout playing. Interdependency in MMOs acts more strongly upon the instrumental level as we have seen, but we need to dig deeper to understand what happens at the psychological level that keeps gamers attached to the game. For that we've analyzed MMO persuasion making use of Cialdini (2001) six influence factors - Reciprocity, Commitment and Consistency, Social Proof, Liking, Scarcity, and Authority. Before presenting our analysis we should have present an element of significant importance related with the basic works of human perception and that is commonly defined as the principle of contrast (Whitney, et al. 1965). This principle states that our perception is affected when we have to see the difference between two things that are presented one after the other.

3.1 Reciprocity

We know that our survival as a species depends on our experience as a group, we compare ourselves to others, we often rely on others for a number of tasks, and in the process, we shape bounds (Bowlby, 1969). It is only natural that the feedback (Watzlawick, 1967) element of communication systems would be seen as vital for us as members of a community. This way, the concept of Reciprocity presented by Cialdini and referent to the way people tend to return favors, is justified. This is embedded into who we are in such a way, that our response comes as an automated process and without doubts. Our response is in fact so strong that:

"...by first doing us a favor, strange, disliked, or unwelcome others can enhance the chance that we will comply with one of their requests," (2001:30)

The design of reciprocity in MMOs is not as obvious as we see for example in Social Games, but it's supported by the same basic concepts. *WoW* has several features that require players to search for the assistance of others, being the character profession an essential design system for reciprocity. Players have a limit of two professions per character, but the game guarantees that players will need materials or pieces only available from other professions than their own.

Reciprocity is also a very strong persuasion factor when someone considers stop playing. Players often go through so called "burnout time⁶", especially during periods of intense gaming, after the release of new content for example. The problem here is not just the one-to-one reciprocity, but also the group's interests versus the individual. Let's take for example a situation where the group gives an

⁶ Refers to when a player is tired of the current content and asks for a time off from his guild leaders.

important piece of equipment to a specific player during a successful raid. This reward also comes with the responsibility for the player to use that piece, and to be available during future runs so that everyone can also be rewarded. This is not something designed into the system, and doesn't even work as a guild rule in most cases, however, it's something designers take into account, the need to correspond to what the group has given to him.

3.2 Commitment and consistency

Without commitment and consistency, basic elements such as trust, respect or dignity would not be possible. It is assuming the consistency of daily actions that a child knows that its mother will never abandon it. The child can feel safe, grow and develop its creative thinking. This applies throughout life, from birth until death. Therefore, what's crucial is to understand how we can create the foundation for trust. The evolutionary process led this commitment even further. Knox & Inkster (1968) presented a study in which it was verified that subjects who were betting on horse races were much more confident in a particular horse immediately following the implementation of the bet,

“Once we make a choice or take a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment.” (Cialdini, 2001:53)

World of Warcraft is one of the last standing large MMO's supported by a monthly subscription fee. In a time where free-to-play is en vogue and where the financial models of MMO's are turning to micro-transactions, there are still millions of people that keep playing and paying for *WoW*. Our intention is not to argue that consumers value more a product that they pay for, but there is an internal pressure to justify the subscription value with game time. This commitment is also mutual, MMO's need to be updated regularly with new content, the design promotes a series of mechanics that incentivizes players to log in everyday to fulfill a certain number of tasks so there is always something new to see and do by the players.

3.3 Social Proof

The logic of social proof is something that comes from within, something that works in the perceptual and cognitive fields. Contagion happens when we are made to feel or do something on the resemblance of another. One of the areas where this contagion is most effective is the emotional field.

*“A practical case of this process is the known laughter clubs, in vogue in India. Another case (...) are the sound effects of laughter in movies and comic series in the 40-60's, still present in contemporary comic series like *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) and *Friends* (1994-2004).” Zagalo (2009:39)*

Also in the 1950's, Asch (1951) held the so-called "experiments of compliance." He showed that even when we know the correct answer, if the group in which we operate gives the wrong answer, we tend to follow the wrong answer in order to belong to the group. Compliance with the group functions as

something that infects and takes over the decision-making capacity of the subject. Thus the concept of social proof turns out to be linked intrinsically to the functioning of the logic on previous two factors: reciprocity and consistency. Consequently social proof becomes the basic metric we use to gauge our behavior in social situations.

WoW uses its own platform to the continuous production of messages and records about player's actions. A global system like achievements, clearly stratifies players considering what they have and haven't done within the game. When a player levels up there is an animation, when he completes a particular goal he gets an achievement warning, and if his team is the first on a server to defeat the main threat of the expansion, the guild gets a server wide achievement that all players see in real time. This model is not new, even without the existence of online and real time systems; the basis of any "collective game" always had this logic with leaderboards, championships, cups and prizes. The collective nature of MMORPGs motivates players to keep up the progression with their peers, and also incentivizes new players to reach the skill of the most experienced members.

3.4 Liking

"Few of us would be surprised to learn that, as a rule, we most prefer to say yes to the requests of people we know and like." (Cialdini, 2001: 144)

In a simpler form, attraction is the main ingredient that enhances the Social Proof factor discussed above. If people tend to follow the group, they have even greater tendency to follow someone they like or admire within that group.

This liking factor plays a crucial role into keeping players in the game. MMO's are designed to consume almost the entire free time of a player. This makes playing two of these games at the same time close to impossible, so unless groups migrate in mass for a different MMO, it's very unlikely that they just leave their micro communities behind and move on to something different on their own.

Beyond all that *WoW* features two specific services designed around the liking factor, "recruit a friend" and "resurrect a friend". These programs allow players to bring new people to the game, and also bring back friends that had stopped playing. This mechanic eases the promotion work for the game, because new players will arrive directly via friends, just in exchange for some game benefits. It's a way of using the existent community as a marketing tool, giving incentives that mean nothing to those who are invited, but since they can be important for the friend who plays, they might agree to comply and try out the game.

3.5 Scarcity

The supply and demand together with the "just in time" production systems leads to an organic system that is mutable in space and time. Demand for today, once satisfied, no longer exists tomorrow. Therefore it becomes necessary to adjust the supply. One of the techniques created was designated by shortage. Knowing that the low supply may induce greater demand, the best way to ensure the maintenance of the demand is to create the idea that there is scarcity.

“People seem to be more motivated by the thought of losing something than by the thought of gaining something of equal value.” Cialdini (2001:205)

A lot of products from various types use this strategy, one example are chocolates that are only sold during the winter, the Disney classics in DVD/Blu-rays that are sold for a limited amount of time, among several other products that launch limited editions. In the case of *World of Warcraft* we are talking about a product that is already on the market, a product that’s not going to vanish or start having problems of physical supply. So to the supplier’s there is only one need, to keep the player base active, to maintain player’s interest with the game.

Playing online games can feel too much like playing with borrowed toys, failing to be in our possession. As Furby (1991) study demonstrated, possession gives people the “sense of personal competence or control”, and players need to fulfill their control over the game, and the money spent. In some way, this is how “virtual goods” were created in online games. In *WoW* virtual goods are equipment pieces, weapons, mounts, pets or even just cosmetic objects like a picnic table or a perfume. Being a subscription model, these objects are usually available within the game and don’t cost additional money to get, however, some are rare, some are very rare, others are limited or only available on certain occasions (like special holydays). Designers define the levels of scarcity, determining the rarity of virtual goods and how hard they are to get, to keep players involved with the game, persuading them to continue in the name of their competence and control over the game.

3.6 Authority

Human beings have a natural tendency to obey when authority factors are present. In the 1960’s social experiments performed by Milgram (1963), measured willingness to obey an authority figure that instructed subjects to perform actions conflicting with their personal ideas. Subjects shown blind obedience, being available to comply even when morally against their most profound believes. Cialdini summarizes the importance of this obedience within groups and communities,

“Whenever we are faced with a potent motivator of human action, it is natural to expect that good reasons exist for the motivation. In the case of obedience to authority, even a brief consideration of human social organization offers justification aplenty. A multilayered and widely accepted system of authority confers an immense advantage upon a society. It allows the development of sophisticated structures for production of resources, trade, defense, expansion, and social control that would otherwise be impossible.” (2001:195)

In *World of Warcraft*, authority is not directly designed in game rules, but it is stirred in players through constant comparison of game accomplishments, making authority emerge naturally in relations. A player can be recognized an authority by his title, his equipment or his guild position. The structure of a guild in *World of Warcraft* is divided among several ranks, but only one-person rules all, the guild master, the player who created the guild in the first place. Despite this totalitarian figure, the structure

of power in a guild is normally divided between the guild master and several other officers⁷, sort of like a general and his colonels.

Guild leaders can enforce more or less authority depending on the guild's objectives, and top end game guilds are very strict with their rules and the obedience of their members. Also as we've seen, the greatest challenges of the game demand synchronous and symmetrical types of cooperative gameplay to be beaten, requiring careful planning, strategy and sometimes flawless execution for victory to be achieved and that means total obedience to the guild master and the officers who work on the strategies for those fights. We can say that game design doesn't enforce authority, but surely encourages it, designing rewards for the fiercer authoritarian groups. Consequently authority becomes a game goal.

Conclusion

The research presented here is not exhaustive and excludes many other situations in the game where we can see the same strategies in use, for example the expanding development of social messaging, both instant and asynchronous with several layers of relations and interconnectivity with social networks. Blizzard's Real ID and Battle tag systems allow a multiplatform approach to chat; the smartphone application that allows players to access the auction house, their bank and even the guild chat in real time anywhere. These tools might become crucial as publishers move to a multi-MMO/game approach, to encourage players to stick with a particular network of games, building their commitment to it and improving the chances they'll invest time in building up friends on that network, increasing game revenues in subscriptions or micro transactions in the process.

Anyway from this analysis we can extract the conclusion that game design for social interaction is deeply rooted in evolutionary influential factors for the maintenance of communities. Interdependency is in fact the root for all networking systems in nature. At the same time MMO social strategies are being designed accordingly to very well know marketing techniques from the middle of the 20th century. In part this can result in the conclusion that the essential objective of MMOs is to guarantee selling and return, but more important than that is to guarantee its one survival.

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⁷ Officer refers to the second rank of a guild. Usually each officer is responsible for a different aspect of a guild's management.

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