Chapter 5

The Savory Deviant Delight: A Study of Trust & Normative Order in an Online World

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ABSTRACT

Massively Multiplayer Online worlds (MMOs), like World of Warcraft (WoW) have been established as increasingly prominent, technologically-based communities. Because MMOs require high-levels of cooperative activity, and are organized in an anonymous, virtual space, the establishment of a normative order among participants is essential. Trust is a key component of that normative order. This study examines trust and normative order among WoW game-players, and is based upon an ethnographic analysis of the gaming community. The results identify four primary techniques of normative order maintenance that are both formally institutionalized in the game, and informally organized within the player community itself. Trust is identified as a key resource through which players manage the uncertainties of their technologically-based community, and maintain the integrity of WoW’s normative order. The study concludes that the construction of a normative order within online worlds is crucial and that trust plays an important role in their stability.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this study is a spoof on the name of a cooking recipe found in the Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG or MMO) World of Warcraft (WoW). When cooked, this recipe, “the savory deviate delight,” transforms the countenance of a player’s in-game avatar and alters its true identity. The recipe is quite popular among players in the game as the “deviate” disguise provides a character with a “deviant” appearance, and although the transformation is singly cosmetic, it introduces an element of surprise, entertainment and humor into the game.

The effects of eating the “savory deviate delight” provide an analyst of WoW with a metaphor of the game itself and the relationship that many players have toward their game-play. In the same way that

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the “savory deviate delight” allows characters to transform their in-game appearance, WoW allows players to become quite extraordinary compared to their real-life selves. Much like the “delights” of this deviate recipe, WoW permits players the opportunity not only to become something unexpected compared with their real-life identities but, also, to take on mischievous and frequently deviant roles in a technologically-mediated environment already permeated with illusion and fantasy.

WoW is the most prominent of a genre of MMOs that have become increasingly popular over the past three decades. MMOs are the contemporary synthesis of role-playing games (like Dungeons and Dragons) and online virtual communities (like Multi-User Dungeons). Released in November of 2004, WoW boasts nearly 12 million subscribers, and heralds players from every continent worldwide. Because of its mass appeal and the complexity of its design, WoW provides an interesting sociological environment for the study of community organization, social identity construction and technologically-mediated communication. Given that players in the game are largely anonymous by real-life standards, and that no player could possibly be in real-life the character they portray, WoW creates an intriguing sociological context for the study of normative order, the emergence of trust in social relationships, the techniques that engender its maintenance, and the consequences of its transgression.

This study is based upon an ethnographic analysis of one WoW community, and investigates the techniques of normative order construction that are both institutionalized within the game’s design, and are created more informally among players themselves. Of specific interest is the degree to which trust is cultivated among players, and the tacit role that trust plays in managing the uncertainties of social interaction in a virtual environment largely circumscribed by anonymity and pretense. The study begins with a synopsis of WoW game-play as a sociological environment. It then moves to a review of the relevant literatures on normative order and trust with specific implications for online social environments. The results of the analysis outline and describe four techniques of normative order maintenance that emerge among players who work to construct a basis for trust within the WoW community. The cultivation of trust within WoW is explored with respect to both the formal structure of the game and the informal culture that is created among the players themselves.

BACKGROUND

A Synopsis of World of Warcraft

WoW is the largest and most well-known of a series of MMOs that are on the cutting edge of online social worlds. Thematically, WoW is based upon a fantasy world that is imbued with magic and sword-play, fantastic treasures, powerful monsters and puzzle-solving adventure. As a character-driven game, one of the fundamental objectives in WoW is for players to create and advance their avatars by enhancing their skills and abilities through the completion of ever-increasing complex tasks. To begin their game-play, players select a server on which they will play. There are unique server types, and each server can contain tens-of-thousands of characters. Next, players, choose to participate in one of two competing factions (Alliance or Horde). These factions are opponents in the game and players are not able to directly interact across factions except through non-verbal “emotes.” Within each faction, players choose among a set of races for their character, select a gender (female or male), and ornament their character with a variety of physical attributes (hair styles, facial features, skin pigmentation, etc.). After the selection of a character’s race, players choose among a set of racial-specific classes each of which has specified abilities and are designed to bring specific attributes to group game-play.