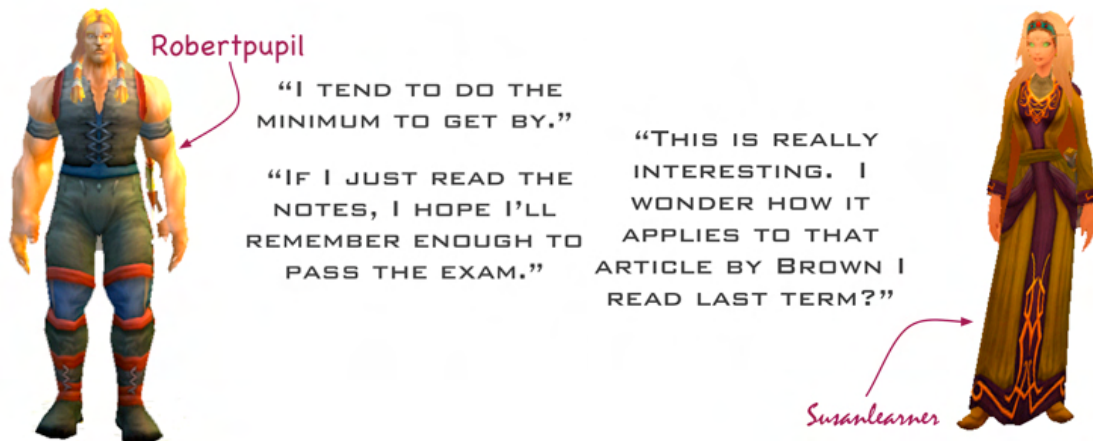

WoW: Learning

Proposal for Consideration
by the School Research Governance Committee
Informatics, University of Sussex

Primary investigator: Michelle A. Hoyle
Supervisor: Dr. Judith Good
Date: March 10, 2010



Biggs & Tang's Robert (Biggs and Tang, 2007 p.9) & Susan as World of Warcraft characters. Robert tends to use remembering and understanding, whereas Susan is more prone to spontaneously use higher order critical thinking skills like analysis, evaluation, and creation. One research goal is to look for "Roberts" and "Susans" in game worlds by examining player motivations.

WoW: Learning

Proposal for Consideration
by the School Research Governance Committee

Primary investigator: Michelle A. Hoyle
Supervisor: Dr. Judith Good
Date: March 10, 2010

Section A. Brief outline of research background

Coming from a background in higher education via distance education and online communities, we are interested in the link between people's motivations and the learning that comes from building communities of practice (Wenger, 2008), particularly in the 26+ demographic where 75% of the Open University's new students originate. In this two-year project, we will explore the motivations of World of Warcraft players and examine the learning that takes places in their guilds and alliances, both in game and out.

Where does the learning come from? Learning is everywhere in the game. In order to contribute to a team effectively, people need to learn to play their characters well. Each character has specific abilities and learning to play well requires a substantial time investment. Other people are interested in more effectively killing things and devote hours outside of the game to reading about their character's role and how to improve on it, often in very tiny increments. Forum discussions abound about the best equipment for particular classes and models are constructed of how in-game equipment will perform under certain conditions.

The initial research into motivation will be through a set of online surveys. The first survey, intended for about 50 participants from the EU-Thunderhorn server (see Figure 1), will collect some primarily game-related demographic information and allow participants to express in their own words why they enjoy playing the game and why they belong to a given guild. This initial, open-ended survey will be used to develop a set of motivations which will then be used to develop a closed survey to be administered to a larger sample at a later date.

Later research will take an ethnographic approach, relying on existing social capital gained in the game to interview and observe the interactions of players in their guilds, while they adventure together, or while they have fun. Interactions will take place both in game, as experienced directly by avatars, and via discourse analysis of postings in public and private forums. This requires careful risk management and considerations regarding where informed consent is required. We are guided in our interactions by best practices in the area of virtual world studies as described later.

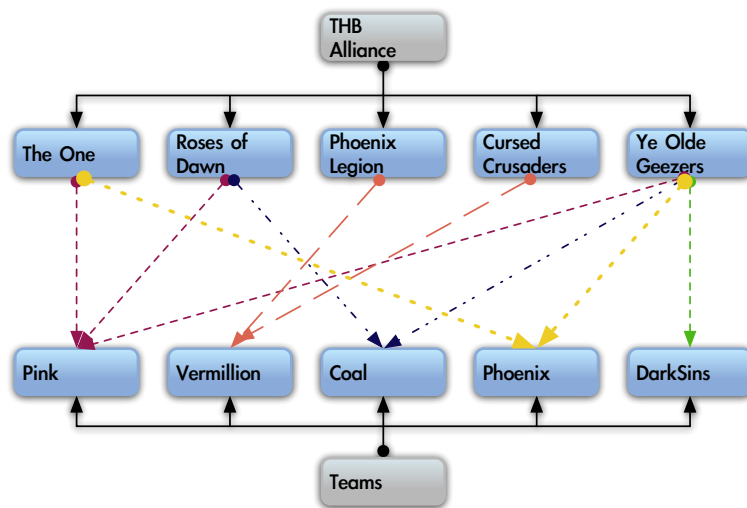


Figure 1: Organization of The Honourbound Alliance on EU-Thunderhorn depicting the participating guilds on the top and specific adventure teams from the participating guilds on the bottom.
Source: Hoyle, 2009

Section B. Description of methods involved

Participants

For the initial surveys, participants will be drawn from five associated guilds¹ comprising The Honourbound Alliance (see Figure 1). These guilds, totalling about 437 unique people, are mostly composed of mature players (over eighteen), although one or two of the guilds do accept members over thirteen to join them. We are not interested in motivations of young players, so the pre-survey page will explicitly make it clear that it is intended for adult players and participants will be asked to confirm in their participation acceptance that they are over eighteen.

There is the potential for ethnographic data to be collected from minors. This is unavoidable in circumstances where we are participating and observing in-game. It would be inappropriate or out-of-character to be discussing ages. In all circumstances, however, where specific consent to use material is sought, the participant will be asked to confirm they are of legal age. Participants in game have already agreed to Blizzard's (2008; 2009) *Terms of Use* that state they are either of legal age or the account has been established for a minor by a parent who is responsible for determining the suitability of World of Warcraft for their child. Ethnographic details will be collected primarily on the EU-Thunderhorn server, with an estimated population of several thousands of people at a minimum.²

Our investigation period will cover the period March 2010 to May 2012.

¹ Guilds are also known as clans and are in-game communities with shared goals and in-game communication channels, essentially a community of practice.

² Actual statistics regarding number of individual players (rather than characters) on a given server are difficult to obtain.

Recruiting (Initial survey)

Participants for the initial survey will be recruited through a number of avenues:

1. advertising to members of The Honourbound Alliance on EU-Thunderhorn in game via a shared chat channel with a very brief description and a URL that leads to a fuller description and the survey;
2. postings requesting participation on the forums of the five related EU-Thunderhorn guilds and The Honourbound Alliance web site that will again lead to a web site with a full description and the survey;
3. word of mouth amongst associated guilds from their guild leaders and Honourbound Alliance guild representatives asking people to participate and pointing them at the web site with the full description and the survey;
4. word of mouth on the EU-Thunderhorn server directing people to the web site with the full description and the survey.

Recruiting (Follow-up survey)

Participants for the follow-up survey are intended to be recruited more widely and be in substantially larger numbers. They will be recruited through the following methods:

1. advertising periodically via game-wide chat channels on the EU-Thunderhorn server with a brief description and a URL that leads to a fuller description and the survey;
2. postings requesting participation the Blizzard EU and US World of Warcraft forums that will again lead to a web site with a full description and the survey; this assumes that we are able to secure permission from the Blizzard forum moderators;
3. word of mouth amongst game players from US and EU World of Warcraft players;
4. postings on the Twitter micro-blogging service³ using relevant World of Warcraft hash tag with a brief description and a URL that leads to a fuller description and the survey;
5. postings, if permitted, on some popular World of Warcraft public forums, like Elitist Jerks⁴ and WoWWiki⁵, with a brief description and a URL to a fuller description and the survey;
6. articles requesting participation, if possible, on WoW-related news sites, like WoW Insiders⁶, Curse Gaming⁷, and Project Lore⁸, where the article describes the research and gives people a URL to go to for further information and participation;
7. word of mouth from people who have been made aware of the project and who point others at the web site with the project's full description and the survey.

3 <http://www.twitter.com/>

4 <http://elitistjerks.com/forums.php/>

5 <http://www.wowwiki.com/Forum:Index>

6 <http://www.wow.com/>

7 <http://www.curse.com/>

8 <http://www.projectlore.com/>

Procedure (Ethnographic work)

Participants for ethnographic work will be drawn from EU-Thunderhorn where we have an existing, well-established presence. The majority will come from guilds associated with The Honourbound Alliance and arise out of normal interactions amongst guilds and guild members in game play or on associated guild forums.

Interviewees for specific, in-depth case studies will be approached via private message (an in-game "whisper") or in-game mail message that will briefly explain the project and invite participation. Interviews will normally take place in game via avatars, a shared Ventrilo voice communications server, Skype, or instant messaging. All interviews will be recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Interviewees will be contacted later to confirm that they are happy with the write-up or our interpretation of what they have told us.

Where participants are drawn from public World of Warcraft forums, they will be contacted using the forum's private messaging system. Interviews will take place via Skype (or similar voice systems), instant messaging, or e-mail correspondence. Audio interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Participants will be asked to agree to this on the consent form.

World of Warcraft provides in-game tools for logging text-based interactions between players in guilds, game areas, and shared chat channels. This facility is available to all players, so it is not deemed unusual for interactions to be recorded via this medium or via screenshots. Transcripts will be collected this way, but where specific quotations are going to be used, the individual involved will likely be contacted for permission unless it is deemed public and non-sensitive (see Risks section and framework). Screenshots are not expected to be used, but permissions from persons appearing in screenshots as other than background material will be sought from those persons or they will be blurred out. In-game names will, in any case, be obscured.

Public World of Warcraft forums will be visited throughout the project to look for examples of communities of practice, threads demonstrating motivation, or examples of learning. Copies of the relevant postings will be made with the permission of the forum's moderators or administrators who will be contacted in advance to explain the purpose of the research and the safeguards relating to the privacy of the forum's participants. Permission will be sought to use specific quotations or feature people prominently in the research.

In all cases, participants' real names will not be known, unless we personally know a given participant, in which case names will be kept confidential. In addition, although people have character names in the game, those names will also be anonymized with pseudonyms in subsequent analysis and presentation of research results. It will be made clear to all participants contacted for consent that they are free to participate or not in this research at any point in time and that we will be guided by their wishes (see consent forms).

Procedure (Surveys)

Surveys will be completed using SurveyMonkey⁹ online survey tool which is Section 508 compliant¹⁰ and certified in compliance with the American Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (U.S. General Services Administration, n.d.), so it is

9 <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>

10 http://s3.amazonaws.com/SurveyMonkeyFiles/508_Guide.pdf

accessible to those with various disabilities. However, it is important to note that most disabilities that would make the survey difficult to complete would also make playing World of Warcraft difficult or impossible. The exception is for participants with dyslexia, who may experience difficulty in the first survey where a lengthy discursive answer is requested. They can contact the researchers for an alternative arrangement or opt to participate in the later survey that does not feature long answer responses.

No surveys conducted will ask for or automatically collect any personally identifiable information, such as real name, telephone number, home address, or IP address. Not even in-game character names, specific game server names, or guild names will be collected. The exception is an optional question at the end asking if participants are happy to be contacted with queries about their survey responses and/or to participate in future surveys. Participants can leave an e-mail address and tick boxes for none, one, or both options. This personal data will be associated with the rest of the survey data and there is a warning on the survey to that effect. Some basic demographic details, such as age, gender, country of origin, and nationality are collected for the purposes of making statements about specific groups of players.

As a thank you, survey participants have the option of entering a lottery for an in-game virtual pet. This requires the collection of an e-mail address as the winner (s) will be mailed codes good for redemption in game, regardless of the game server they play on. That e-mail address is not collected at SurveyMonkey with the rest of the survey data. It is collected on a separate server and stored in a separate database. There is no identifiable link between the survey at SurveyMonkey and the collection of the e-mail address.

Abuse of the lottery system is prevented by the survey's "thank you" page at WebMonkey requesting a one-time code from a list of pre-generated codes on the external server. The participant then proceeds to the external web site where they are asked for their one-time code, e-mail address and game server region, because some loot codes cannot be used on both the American and European game servers. The one-time code is checked to see if it is a valid one-time code and if it has already been used. If it has not, it is marked as "used" and the participant's e-mail address and realm are added to the lottery database. At the conclusion of the survey, at least three pets will be awarded. These will be purchased from the Blizzard on-line store or from eBay.

Section C. Risks to participants involved

Participants will be in their own homes or workplaces, so any health risks or electrical hazards are those normally present and therefore their own responsibility.

Survey participants are not considered vulnerable, as they will be over eighteen and legally capable of assessing the risks. They will be asked to confirm participant eligibility when giving their consent to participate. In-game participants will be asked to confirm their age when giving consent.

There is a risk of reputation damage to ourselves or the participants as well community disruption due to our research activities. Our goal is to minimize this as much as possible. We are benefitting from the advice and experiences of other primarily ethnographic researchers in the space as detailed in McKee and Porter (2009) and Reid (1996). Their advice covers transparency, disclosure, topic sensitivity, and public vs. private. In particular, it provides a framework with a

visual heuristic about when and where informed consent is required (see Figure 2), a murky topic in virtual worlds where so much occurs in “public” spaces.

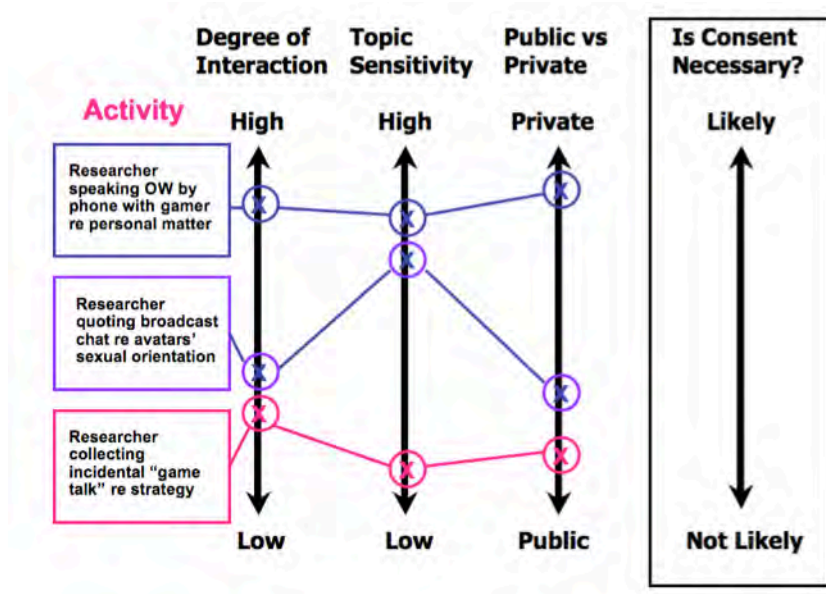


Figure 2: Visual heuristic framework for deciding when informed consent is needed, with sample research projects mapped onto grid.
Source: McKee and Porter, 2009 p.32

Given the lack of personally identifiable information collected in the surveys, we do not anticipate any risks to the privacy, reputation, or well-being of participants undertaking the survey. The questions themselves are straightforward and should not evoke any emotional trauma, given that this is a game that people voluntarily play for pleasure. Should anyone experience any discomfort, they may stop their participation at any time during the survey process, either permanently or return to the survey at a later date and continue from where they stopped, provided they are using the same computer. This is managed directly by SurveyMonkey.

E-mail addresses for the lottery will be collected and stored temporarily on a cloud-based virtual server to which remote access is limited to a set of known IP addresses, as well as a user name and password. As a former system administrator, the primary investigator is vigilant in keeping the system patched and avoiding major security holes through the use of scanning and monitoring software and standard system security practices. The possibility of a breach cannot be completely avoided if someone is determined, but the risk of a remote breach is relatively small. Physical security of the hardware is not under our control, but the perceived risk is low. The e-mail addresses and game server details will not be encrypted. The data will be removed from the server shortly after each survey study is complete.

Ethnographic data collected will be stored on the primary researcher’s personal computer. The raw data will still have in-game names attached to it. Likewise, forum posts or interviews will have some names stored with the raw transcript data and be stored on that same computer. The raw survey data will eventually be downloaded from SurveyMonkey and also stored on that same computer. All project data will be backed up onto a network accessible storage device (NAS) at the researcher’s home. The intention is to store the data on an encrypted disk image, so it is not accessible without being unlocked. If the researcher’s computer or NAS is stolen or lost, the data will still be encrypted and not easily accessible.

This should substantially reduce the risk of reputation damage or data disclosure through unauthorized data release.

It should be noted that we are using a group SurveyMonkey account, where any member of the IDEAs Lab could theoretically access data in the SurveyMonkey account at any time. To reduce the risk of exposure, any data collected using SurveyMonkey will be removed as soon as possible from the SurveyMonkey account.

The primary researcher's—a participant themselves—privacy is potentially at risk, because they will be advertising the project in public forums and making themselves quite visible in game and in forums. To increase in-game credibility and provide transparency, they will not be making any efforts to hide their real-world identity or associated personal and professional web sites. They will, however, be using a project-specific e-mail address provided by the University of Sussex. to avoid their personal mailboxes from collecting spam (or other unwanted mails) and to maintain a professional looking appearance. The risks to their own personal privacy from disclosure of information on the Internet are well understood and not likely to be increased substantially by this activity.

Section D. Benefits to participants involved

Survey participants will be provided with a web site where they can follow developments in our research. Where we have made appeals on forums, we will post follow-up messages with current findings and a pointer to a more detailed description. We will try to get articles posted on the main World of Warcraft news sites or even on the Blizzard main World of Warcraft site with results and findings as they become available to help disseminate the information. It is likely we will have to build a separate web site, similar to Nick Yee's Daedulus Project (2008), to aggregate all the results in one place.

For those who are interested in achievements or ownership of all possible pets, they have the opportunity to win rare or paid-for pets as a result of participating in the surveys. There is also the feel-good factor involved in helping others.

Some participants may find they have a better understanding of themselves and their own motivations after they have been given the opportunity to reflect on what it is that interests them in the game or attracts them to the game. This could lead to a better life/play balance or a better understanding of what they want to achieve in the game or because of the game.

For players in The Honourbound Alliance, their participation gives us a reason to spend more time in game. That translates into more adventures and opportunities for them, as we are deeply involved in coordinating activities for the alliance as well as running one of the participating guilds. It also helps promote The Honourbound Alliance as what James Gee (2007) calls an affinity group—also known as Wenger's (2008) communities of practice—where the act of participating in the normal activities organized by the researchers and the research itself rebounds to support the group in being a group.

Finally, participants and communities involved in the research will realize they are developing skills in game and in forums that have value in the real world, such as for obtaining jobs (c.f. Brown and Thomas, 2006; WGBH Educational Foundation, 2009) and working in online communities for formal or informal learning, such as they might encounter in higher education online. Many World of Warcraft players have significant others who do not necessarily understand or condone the amount

of time spent in game. Findings and participation could potentially be used to help justify the time spent. Given the negative connotations of gaming, publicizing the usefulness of in-game activities to lifelong learning would also be useful on a much broader scale to the general public.

Section E. Ethical issues raised by the project

Potential ethical issues have been addressed in the risks section.

Should issues arise as a consequence of subsequent activities, we will provide the Research Governance Committee with an addendum document for further approval.

Section F. Has part or all of this proposal been considered by any other ethics committee?

No

REFERENCES

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007) 'Chapter 1: The Changing Scene in University Teaching', in *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 3rd edition, Maidenhead, United Kingdom, Open University Press. pp. 1-14.

Blizzard Entertainment, I. (2009) *World of Warcraft® Terms of Use Agreement*, [online] Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. Available from: <http://www.wow-europe.com/en/legal/termsofuse.html> (Accessed February 18, 2010).

Blizzard Entertainment, I. (2008) *World of Warcraft® Terms of Use Agreement*, [online] Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. Available from: <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/legal/termsofuse.html> (Accessed February 18, 2010).

Brown, J.S. & Thomas, D. (2006) 'You Play World of Warcraft? You're Hired!' *Wired*, 14.04 [Online] Available from: <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.04/learn.html> (Accessed February 21, 2010).

Gee, J.P. (2007) *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, 2nd Edition edition, New York, NY, United States, Palgrave Macmillan.

Hoyle, M. (2009) *WoW! Roberts & Susans Game Learning*, [online] Slide presentation. Available from: <http://www.slideshare.net/Eingang/wow-roberts-and-susans-game-learning-a-look-at-world-of-warcraft-higher-education-learning-and-motivation> (Accessed February 21, 2010).

McKee, H.I. & Porter, J.E. (2009) 'Playing a Good Game: Ethical Issues in Researching MMOGs and Virtual Worlds' *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*, 2 (1), [Online] Available from: http://ijire.net/issue_2.1.html (Accessed February 4, 2010).

Reid, E. (1996) 'Informed Consent in the Study of On-Line Communities: A Reflection on the Effects of Computer-Mediated Social Research', *The Information Society: An International Journal*, 12 (2), pp:169-174. Also available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713856138> (Accessed February 2, 2010).

U.S. General Services Administration. (n.d.) *Section 508 Standards*, [online] Section 508. Available from: <http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Content&ID=12> (Accessed February 18, 2010).

Wenger, E. (2008) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, New York, NY, United States, Cambridge University Press.

WGBH Educational Foundation. (2009) *Is World of Warcraft on Your Resume?*, [online] video, Digital Nation. Available from: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/virtual-worlds/video-games/is-world-of-warcraft-on-your-resume.html> (Accessed February 10, 2010).

Yee, N. (2008) *The Daedalus Project*, [online]. Available from: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/docs/shared-data.php> (Accessed February 21, 2010).