Social Experience in World of Warcraft: Technological and Ideological Mediations

Nicole Crenshaw
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697, USA
crenshan@uci.edu

Abstract
I analyze social experience in World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the longest running massively multiplayer online games (MMO). Changes to WoW intended to streamline aspects of gameplay, such as time required to play and level of difficulty in play, affected many social affordances that had previously encouraged and rewarded sociality between players. I argue that social experience in online games is a product of two factors: the social affordances provided by the game and the ideology of wider culture.

Author Keywords
Massively Multiplayer Online Games; Social Experience; Sociality; Neoliberalism; Online Communities; Affordances; World of Warcraft

ACM Classification Keywords
K.8.0 PERSONAL COMPUTING: General - Games

Program Context
In September 2016, I begin my fifth year of PhD studies in Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. I advanced to PhD candidacy in December 2014, presenting research on the ways that players use character names to convey aspects of their identity [5]. I have first-authored two conference papers on my dissertation work. The first paper, “‘It Was More than Just the Game, It was the Community’: Social Affordances in Online Games,” focuses on changes to World of Warcraft that reduced the social experience [6]. The second, “‘Something We Loved That Was Taken Away’: Community and Neoliberalism in World of Warcraft,” examines social life on Nostalrius Begins, a World of Warcraft private server. I submitted this paper to HICSS 2017 [4]. This calendar year, I am finishing my analysis and continuing to write about my findings. I expect to defend my dissertation by March 2017.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the Owner/Author. Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

CHI PLAY’16 Extended Abstracts, October 16-19, 2016, Austin, TX, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-4458-6/16/10.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2968120.2990468
CHIPlay Doctoral Consortium is an opportunity for me to discuss and refine my analysis of the declining social experience in World of Warcraft with other game studies scholars.

Research Context and Motivation
Massively multiplayer online games have, historically, been sites of long-term collaboration, competition, and sociality. However, changes to World of Warcraft have altered collaborative play in favor of performing activities alone. Many of these changes encourage neoliberal strategies. The concept of neoliberalism can be traced back to Milton Friedman’s seminal book, Capitalism and Freedom. Many contemporary scholars have criticized neoliberal theory. For example, political scientist Wendy Brown argues that neoliberal societies overwhelmingly dictate that all conduct is economic in nature: “all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized” [3]. Changes to WoW mirror this sentiment, encouraging players to focus on their needs, rather than the needs of the community. What do these changes mean for players who enjoyed the social experience WoW once provided?

In a neoliberal society, members value competition and individualistic self-interest over community relationships. This attitude is problematic for many players. Some have found ways to relive experiences that they enjoyed from older versions of the game by playing on private servers. Some private servers recreate earlier versions of the game. Can returning to an earlier version of WoW revitalize the sociality documented in prior literature [12,13]?

Background and Related Work
Research shows that sociality in some online games has declined [2,7,8,12–14]. Some researchers argue that changes intended to make WoW easier to play alone hinder the social experience previously provided [6,9,12,13]. Nardi [12] explains how changes to raid group sizes from 20-40 people to 10-25 people altered social dynamics. Other changes made smaller group activities, such as quests, easier to perform alone. “Solo-play,” or playing alone, has become more common, and is often encouraged by the game’s design [2,6,13]. O’Connor et al. [13] found that an increase in solo-play could be traced to changes in game mechanics that no longer require players to cooperate. Solo-play is not, however, a new phenomenon. Ducheneaut et al. [8] found that classes that were more “soloable” were often more popular, and found that grouping with other characters was less efficient for leveling. Using Ducheneaut et al. as a baseline comparison, Poor [14] examined leveling patterns of players affiliated with a “guild,” or a stable group of players. Similarly, Poor found that players in guilds did not contribute to more efficient leveling [14]. If players are punished for grouping together, what motivation do they have to form social connections with others?

In prior work with my advisor [6], I explored how changes to game mechanics reduced social interaction, even in situations where players were collaborating or inhabiting the same areas. Braithwaite [2] argued, even more emphatically, that changes in WoW’s design encouraged players to see one another as obstacles or competitors, rather than potential collaborators: “WoW has...[trended] away from collaborative effort in favor of measures of individual achievement.” The game now
favors a more entrepreneurial and individualistic subjectivity, which mirrors neoliberal values [2].

**Statement of Thesis**
I argue that the social affordances of a game interact with the ideology of the wider culture in which we are all immersed to produce certain kinds of social experiences. I examine changes to systems that mediate player interactions. For example, the algorithm for creating ad hoc groups has changed to allow for a wider pool of players. Initially, groups were formed from players on one’s own server, but eventually groups could contain players from multiple servers. The neoliberal ideology creates a tension between community and competition. Often, this tension emerges through the design of the game in situations where players are encouraged to focus on their own desires without regard for what their group members may need [9]. As a result of this struggle, many players reported experiencing an overall decline in social experience in World of Warcraft.

**Research Approach and Methods**
I investigated WoW through multiple field sites. I (1) analyzed publically available data from a Facebook group for a World of Warcraft server, (2) evaluated publically available data on the World of Warcraft official forums and Nostalrius Begins official forums, (3) conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with current and former World of Warcraft and Nostalrius Begins players, (4) performed an ethnography of the Nostalrius Begins private server including chatlogs and content from related forums, and (5) examined online news articles, forum posts, social media comments, and updates from the Nostalrius Begins’ development team following the server’s closure on April 10, 2016.

My research methodologies follow Boellstorff et al.’s [1] guidelines for ethnographic inquiry in virtual worlds. Qualitative data, including interviews and ethnographic notes, are analyzed using grounded theory methodologies [15] with axial coding.

**Results to Date**
My research demonstrates a fundamental tension between sociality and competition in online games. There are three key findings from my work thus far. (1) Players derive satisfaction from creating and maintaining identities across online games to sustain their online relationships [5]. (2) Many players are dissatisfied with game mechanics that have changed the social experience of games from group-based collaboration to solo-play in parallel with other players [6]. Some players sought out private servers that mimicked earlier versions of a game as a way to recreate the social experience that they missed. (3) However, players brought values from the neoliberal society in which they live into the private servers and often used them to dictate gameplay [4]. My findings suggest that players want to build and maintain relationships within games and related spaces, but are often encouraged by the game and other players to focus on their own self-interest, even to the detriment of other players.

**Dissertation Status**
I have initial drafts of my dissertation introduction and theoretical framing. Attending the CHIPlay Doctoral Consortium would give me the opportunity to further discuss my findings with my peers and mentors to consider appropriate framing of my results in a way that is understandable to a game studies audience.
Expected Contributions
My dissertation research demonstrates how the social experience in WoW was altered as a result of changes in the game’s design. My work documents how neoliberal ideologies are embedded into the games and online communities we create. While Nostalrius Begins was created for players to “experience the glory days of World of Warcraft” (see Figure 1), the tensions between neoliberal behaviors and community prevented this goal. In my ethnographic work on Nostalrius Begins, I documented the rise of neoliberalism in a gaming microcosm, and the effects that the players, in a neoliberal society, had on their social experience.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Bonnie Nardi, for her continued support and encouragement throughout my graduate studies.

References