“It Was More than Just the Game, It Was the Community”: Social Affordances in Online Games

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Abstract
We analyze social affordances from World of Warcraft (WoW), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMO). These affordances contributed to community development and social experiences. To reduce the time needed to play and make gameplay easier, expansions to the game removed or altered many affordances. The changes were appealing to some, but diminished social experience, to the dismay of other players. As social life continues to move into virtual worlds of all kinds, we argue that developers should provide different versions of virtual worlds to broaden the kinds of social experiences possible. We examine “private servers” as a form of resistance, where players create their own versions of the game to accommodate their play preferences.

1. Introduction
As our lives become increasingly enmeshed in online contexts, it is important to understand the opportunities that digital spaces afford for social experience and human interaction [15,16,24]. Virtual worlds and online games offer new kinds of social experiences [3,8,25,29,33,34,35]. We examine relations between social affordances, social experience, and virtual worlds by analyzing changes to World of Warcraft. When Blizzard Entertainment released WoW in late 2004, the game was challenging, and required players to collaborate in groups to complete certain tasks. Later versions introduced changes that made play easier, which altered the game’s social affordances. Though an easier game was arguably accessible to a wider audience, some players felt that the changes negatively affected their social experience by removing or reducing the amount of collaboration and communication required [28,42].

J.J. Gibson introduced the concept of affordance as a way to explain animals’ perceptions of their environment: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” [17]. The concept has been used in the fields of human-computer interaction [5,14,20,27], computer-supported cooperative work [6,15], and other social-computing fields [10,21,22,37].

Bradner [5,6], drawing inspiration from the work of Ackerman and Palen [1], developed the notion of social affordances. She defines social affordance as “the relationship between the properties of an object and the social characteristics of a given group that enable particular kinds of interaction among members of that group” [5]. She uses a door with a window in a busy hallway as an example [5,6]. The window affords the person opening the door the ability to see if the other side is clear. Because people are socialized not to hit others with doors, a person will refrain from opening the door when they can see someone in front of it. The assumption of a possible social interaction supports the social affordance.

We use Bradner’s concept of social affordance. Her definition accounts for multiple actors interacting within a collaborative, social environment [5,6]. In our analysis, we are concerned with the relationship between changes to World of Warcraft, social interactions made possible or impossible by the changes, and players’ social experiences.

World of Warcraft is periodically changed through small “patches” (software updates), and major “expansions” in which new geographies, activities, and equipment are added. WoW has had five expansions, the most recent released in late 2014 (about one every two years). When changes from patches and expansions alter social affordances, the effects may cause disruptions in play [25,28].

The WoW community colloquially refers to World of Warcraft prior to expansions as “Vanilla WoW” or just “Vanilla.” Many claim that Vanilla WoW encouraged social interactions and fostered
robust social experiences [25,28,39]. For example, when WoW was released, players used chat channels to find others for collaborative group activities. In late 2006, changes to the game shifted the actions required for finding others to a new, impersonal interface in which players were automatically, algorithmically matched. Some felt that the interface for finding other players removed opportunities for social interactions that the chat channels, though time-consuming, had encouraged through direct, personal interactions.

Blizzard hosts public forums for its games that allow players to express their concerns and debate with peers, while affording Blizzard the ability to make public statements to players. As more changes altered the game, players began to voice their concerns on WoW’s forums [25]. After the release of World of Warcraft’s 2012 expansion, a lead designer said: “We would have been in bad shape had we not [made the game appeal to a wider audience]...People who played Vanilla always say, ‘If it had stayed the same, I would have the same fun now as I did then.’ But that’s not true. Audiences always evolve” [42].

However, many players felt that the changes hindered the social experience that WoW previously provided [13,25,28]. In a study conducted from 2009-2010, O’Connor et al. (2015) found that WoW players could develop a sense of community, establish social identities, and provide social support to others. Though only two expansions had been released by 2010, O’Connor et al.’s participants were already complaining about the loss of social experience and reflecting on “the good old days” before “changes to the game that...made it more accessible to a wider audience...[and] reduced the sense of community among players” [28]. For example, one of O’Connor’s participants said: “[When you ask a question now], everyone’s response is, ‘Use Google, dickhead.’ Instead of going ‘Oh yeah it’s over here.’” Some changes that made the game “more accessible to a wider audience” decreased the need for collaboration and communication, altering the sense of community and the ways that players interacted.

We investigated World of Warcraft’s social affordances through an analysis of two changes to the game’s functionality, and through a study of a long-term WoW community. To understand how the changes affected player experience, we analyzed posts on World of Warcraft’s official forums. First, we will examine “Group Finder,” an automated interface that changed how players found others for group activities. Then we investigate “cross-realm zones,” geographic areas of the game that allow players from multiple servers (called “realms” in WoW) to interact. We explain what Group Finder and cross-realm zones are, why Blizzard introduced them, how they function, and their effects on social experience.

Next, we discuss the “Moonfall 4 Life” Facebook group. (Moonfall and Moonfall 4 Life are pseudonyms.) In February, 2014, a former member of the Moonfall realm created the Facebook group. The group served as a place for current and former members of the realm to connect and communicate outside World of Warcraft. Players had retained WoW-related materials that were up to 10 years old, including screenshots, videos, chat logs, and other media that they shared within the group. Though some posts concerned contemporary World of Warcraft issues, many discussed events from when the community played together from 2004 through 2010. Moonfall 4 Life became a place where players could relive old memories, reminisce about the game, and, perhaps most importantly, catch up with each other’s personal lives, including births, deaths, marriages, and other significant events. The group was not just a venue for nostalgia, but a site to maintain a community. Many discussions addressed the decline of social experience following certain changes to World of Warcraft [see 28].

2. Background

Starting in the 1970s, people began to congregate in text-based online worlds that attracted passionate, but small, audiences [2]. Participants enjoyed building out the worlds and chatting with one another [30]. About ten years later, early graphical versions of virtual worlds were developed, and in another ten years, more elaborate graphical game-based worlds appeared. They proved far more popular than their text-only counterparts, and soon millions of people were engaging in vibrant online interactions, taking part together in intense activities in various settings.

WoW is one of the largest MMOs, and certainly the most famous [11,12,23,25,26,31,38]. At its peak, World of Warcraft had over 12 million subscribers worldwide. The population fluctuates, but today is at about 7.1 million [43].

WoW is a 3D, medieval-accented, fantasy world in which players create characters who slay monsters, gather resources such as herbs and minerals, practice crafts such as tailoring and blacksmithing, participate in an economy by auctioning items to other players, and exchange goods and services by completing trade transactions [25]. Some players associate with relatively stable groups known as “guilds” that play together consistently [25,28,38]. Players may also have a “friends list” of others with whom they play, but may interact with anyone they see in-game as...
they pursue activities. Players progress through a series of “zones,” or themed areas of the world such as lush forests, arid deserts, and icy taigas. Players can advance to new zones by completing “quests” (narrativized tasks) in each area that allow them to reach higher “levels” and confront greater challenges. Currently, the maximum character level is 100.

Players are distributed across multiple realms that have population limits of several thousand players. Maximum realm sizes are carefully managed to account for hardware limitations and ensure smooth play. Players continually see the same other players from their own realm, and communities emerge as players collaborate and compete. Over the years, changes to social affordances have altered the social experience provided by realm communities. When the game was first released, players could not interact with people from other realms. In August 2006, an update allowed players to compete against members of other realms in certain contests. By December 2009, players from different realms could perform some cooperative activities together. In May 2012, some zones allowed players from different realms to interact. Eventually, in August 2013, players from different realms were able to join the same guilds. This gradual flattening of the sense of a geography-based community has affected social experience in several ways we will discuss.

2.1. Changes to Social Affordances in WoW

Many affordances in WoW support social experience: multiple text-based chat channels, animated “emotes” that cause characters to perform nonverbal actions (waving, crying, dancing, bowing, and so on), mechanisms for tracking friends, and indicators of who among guild mates and friends is currently online. These affordances foster social bonds, and encourage players to develop ties of friendship which form the basis for collaborative play. We address two changes, Group Finder and cross-realm zones, that afforded a more streamlined play experience. However, these changes also altered social experience, and created varying opinions in the player community about what WoW should be like.

2.1.1. Group Finder. A key change that affected social experience came with the Group Finder interface, starting in late 2006. Group Finder automates the process of finding others for the collaborative activities of “dungeons” (small group activities) and “raids” (large group activities). In December 2006, Blizzard introduced “Looking For Group,” the first version of Group Finder, named after a phrase players used when forming groups in chat channels. The interface allowed players to hasten the process of creating and organizing groups within a realm by advertising that they were looking for group members, or searching through a list of partially-formed groups. Even with Looking for Group, however, there were often still long wait times. In a patch released in December 2009, Blizzard attempted to remedy this problem by providing a larger pool of potential group members that drew players from multiple realms. While more players decreased wait times, the new system changed how players interacted within a group. For example, players were not concerned about maintaining reputations and relationships with people from different realms because they were strangers whom the player was unlikely to see again [7].

2.1.2. Cross-realm zones. Cross-realm zones are areas of the game geography that allow players from different realms to join groups and complete quests together. Blizzard created these zones because some players had complained that certain areas of the game were desolate, which made it difficult to find others with whom to play. In an announcement in May 2012, Blizzard explained: “Cross-realm zones give us the capability to ensure that... zones retain a [larger] population size” [44]. Cross-realm zones do not increase the number of people playing World of Warcraft, but populate geographical areas within the game with players from multiple realms. Including...
more players in a zone afforded benefits such as ease of finding potential group members and opportunities for player-based combat (an activity many players enjoy). However, cross-realm zones introduced new problems. For example, group members from different realms could not participate in certain social activities such as trading game items to one another, which removed some opportunities for sociality.

3. Related Work

Many studies examine affordances of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Zhang (2008) developed design principles for affordances of ICTs. He includes socially-focused principles, such as the facilitation of human-human interaction and development of social bonds to motivate people to use a technology [41]. Jung et al. (2010) found that creating an ICT that provides feedback and an optimal level of challenge (two of Zhang’s design principles) improved collaborative performance [19].

MMOs provide opportunities for many kinds of collaborative, social experiences [3,16,25,33,35]. Whether through brief “random acts of fun” [26] or highly organized raids in which 10 to 40 players collaborate in tightly scripted contests [8], MMOs are places of significant social experience [11,28,29,32,36,38,40]. Schiano et al. (2011) found that among American, European, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong players, 55% made a real life friend in WoW, i.e., someone that they met in the game with whom they socialized offline [31]. Other research has demonstrated that players work to ensure that friendships that start in one game transfer to other games [7,29] or to life offline [25,28,36].

Relationships that begin in a game may lead to socializing and collaborating over many years [7,40]. The social support that players gain from these relationships contributes to the growth of healthy player communities in online games [28,32,36].

O’Connor et al. found that players felt nostalgia for Vanilla WoW [28,39], a time when social experiences seemed built into the game. The authors consider how games and virtual worlds can encourage sociality and a sense of community: “Further research examining which game features promote or diminish the growth of this community could lead to significant changes as to how games are made” [28]. Dabbish et al. (2012) conducted an experiment to explore how communication affected commitment in Group Finder activities. In the study, a confederate player typed scripted dialogue or remained silent during a group activity. Dabbish et al. found that initiating communication early in an activity, significantly increased other members’ communication and commitment [8].

4. Methods

We conducted qualitative analyses of the official World of Warcraft forums and the Moonfall 4 Life Facebook group. The first author engaged in ethnographic observation through active participation in Moonfall 4 Life. Our methodology follows Boellstorff et al.’s [4] guidelines for ethnographic inquiry in virtual worlds. We transcribed all posts verbatim, retaining individual spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors in quotes reported here.

4.1. Forum Posts

We studied posts on the official WoW forums to discover players’ opinions about social experience in WoW. Using the forums’ search function, we found topics related to social experience, Group Finder, and cross-realm zones. We chose terms based on players’ discussions of these topics, including acronyms and abbreviations. Search terms were: social, social experience, sociality, social interaction, Group Finder, LFG, Looking for Group, RDF, Random Dungeon Finder, LFD, Looking for Dungeon phasing, cross-realm, X Realm, cross-realm zones, and CRZ. Posts included in this analysis were created between 2011 and 2015.

It is possible that the opinions expressed on the forums represent a “vocal minority.” While forum posts may or may not be representative of the entire population of a particular game, these posts are important because they allow users to publically discuss their opinions and be heard. We know that Blizzard attends to the forums, as they sometimes respond to various topics. For example, Blizzard claims that they are working to address concerns about sociality, saying that the next expansion will provide “improved social features” [45].

4.2. Moonfall 4 Life

The first author played World of Warcraft on the Moonfall realm, and was invited to join the Moonfall 4 Life Facebook group in late February 2014. We performed an in-depth, qualitative analysis of Facebook posts from the group’s inception until May 2015. We categorized posts by topic, references to WoW, and interactions between members. We focused on posts that critiqued changes that players believed altered the social experience and posts that
emphasized the sense of community in Moonfall. We studied Moonfall 4 Life because the first author had access to the group. Realm-based community groups like Moonfall 4 Life are not uncommon. Searches on Facebook reveal many groups for servers from WoW and other MMOs such as Guild Wars 2 and Wildstar.

We used SurveyMonkey to gather information about player demographics and play practices. 85 of the most active members responded to the survey, with 82 completing the entire survey. Active members were those who had notifications for the group turned on, and checked the page regularly. Players were between 18–51 years old (x = 29), with 24% identifying as female and 76% identifying as male. Educational backgrounds ranged from less than a high school degree to graduate and professional degrees, with the majority having at least some college education. Participants’ occupations included students, housewives, software engineers, marketing executives, nurses, and food service workers.

All participants consented to the use of their character names in our publications. We anonymized other names including Facebook display names and other players’ offline names.

5. Results

While social experience in WoW is central, it is also fragile and vulnerable to changes in the system. Players reported that changes have affected the social experience of the game, and contributed to a decline in sociality. Some did not mind this decline, as the game was easier and more efficient to play, while others were disappointed and felt that something important had been lost.

5.1. Group Finder

The WoW community was divided on whether Group Finder was a boon or a curse. Some players expressed concern on the forums that Group Finder changed how people interacted and turned play activities into “chores”:

“I’ve been in countless dungeons where people just don’t talk. It’s like they’re unwillingly trudging thru everything, aren’t there to socialize...Feels like more of a chore than entertainment.”

Many players argued that the social experience was part of the “charm that came from MMOs” and contributed to the game’s appeal. These players felt that Group Finder diminished communication and decreased loyalty to a group: “Welcome to dungeon finder, where the loot is made up and the people don’t matter.” Some players concluded that automated groups created a disregard for fellow players, which resulted in the objectification of human players as “bots” or computer programs: “[Random Dungeon Finder] or [Raid Finder] could put me with bots and I wouldn't know the difference. No one talks, they just drop the bosses and leave.”

The social experience in group activities had devolved to minimal instrumental interaction, and sometimes, as this player indicated, no interaction at all. Because the system could quickly place a player into a group, players began abandoning unsuccessful groups. One player, frustrated with the widespread acceptance of group abandonment, suggested a rating system to mitigate bad behavior:

“I have noticed that people will often abandon groups upon the slightest failure or death that requires a do-over…I find that the overall attitude of some people…is very poor, and that they should start receiving negative feedback if they continue to treat other people only as a means to their selfish end.”

Others claimed that anti-social behaviors were human nature. Some speculated that the players, not the systems, “ruined social interaction.”

“If people had to be forced to speak to one another by a game mechanic, did they ever actually want to be social anyway? Everyone wants to blame [Looking for Group] for ruining social interaction, but nothing at all is stopping any of us from being friendly...except us.”

To test whether players could continue to be friendly after adapting to a new system, one player performed a social experiment to subvert Group Finder. In a thread called “The Empty Friend List Experiment,” the player explained that she would only perform group activities if the group was formed “the old fashioned way” through chat channels. She described the results:

“I formed exactly zero [dungeon] groups using the old school method...Some responses I received were rather polite, such as ‘if you’re looking to run a dungeon you can just use the [Looking for Dungeon] thing...its what everyone does now,’ and others not so much (’press the i key noob’ was my absolute favorite)...When I explained my reasons for not using the [Looking for Dungeon] method [players] tended to either wish me luck or flat out tell me it was hopeless to form a group in such an outdated fashion.”

This player actively tried to resist Group Finder to recreate the social experience that she believed happened through “old school” group finding. While it was not impossible to return to more “outdated” methods, the community had willingly or unwillingly adopted Group Finder as the norm. Many players argued that even if they wanted to, it was impossible...
to find a group without using Group Finder. The post elicited many sympathetic responses: “This post makes me sad, because I remember how it used to be too.” The friendly sociality of group activities—making new friends and socializing with other players from one’s realm—had declined considerably. Some players believed that the issue was the player community’s compliance with the system: “Too many people that basically want this to be a single player game nowadays. Sad how far the social aspect has fallen.”

Other players acknowledged that Group Finder was useful, but still had room for improvement: “While [Looking for Group] is a great way to break from questing, see content, and get the occasional gears, it feels like a very impersonal way of doing so.” However, some were more skeptical:

“It’s easy to blame it on the tools, but the real blame lies with the players… I don’t blame automobiles for car crash deaths and I don’t blame cigarettes for lung cancer. It also bears mentioning that tools like [Looking for Raid], [Looking for Dungeon] [are] all driven by player demand and feedback. This community made the choice to have the path of least resistance at the cost of having to be part of a multiplayer community.”

Some players reported that they had active social lives with small groups of friends or within their guilds, and because they saw Group Finder as convenient for certain goals, it was acceptable, even with the deterioration of social experience. As one player said: “Spamming trade chat to try to form a dungeon group was dumb and I am glad that [Looking for Dungeon] made that obsolete. I barely ever did dungeon runs outside of my guild and small circle of friends back then and for good reason.” For some, changes like Group Finder were a logical next step for improving play in World of Warcraft, regardless of the impact on social experience.

These posts show that the community was not unified in the decision to convert to a new system. It should be noted that adoption does not imply acceptance, and while players used Group Finder, many of them did not enjoy it. One player posted: “Using it and liking it are not the same thing.” While intended to make play easier and allow players to experience more of the game, some felt that Group Finder was a hindrance to the game’s social life.

5.2. Cross-Realm Zones

Designers hoped that implementing cross-realm zones would aggregate members from multiple realms and thus increase the number of potential group members and opportunities for player interactions. In practice, cross-realm zones reduced the sense of realm community and created excessive competition for resources (such as the gathering of herbs and minerals). Arguments about cross-realm zones were abundant in the forums with some threads surpassing 650 pages of player opinions. Many players acknowledged that cross-realm zones had caused rifts in the player community: “Yep. [cross-realm zone] sure is annoying...Don’t expect any sympathy on these forums though, the [cross-realm zone] lovers will eat your face off.” Player mentalities regarding cross-realm zones were divided. One group believed that cross-realm zones were Blizzard’s response to complaints about the lack of people in some areas of the game. These players viewed cross-realm zones as beneficial:

“CRZ (cross-realm zones) were put in to make leveling zones feel populated. To give you some competition for quest mobs and resources. We complained for years that the leveling zones were empty. Now we complain that there are people in them. Blizzard just can’t win.”

The second group consisted of players who were happier with less populated zones. While some of them recognized that cross-realm zones were a response to community complaints, they believed that the change did not address the problem. In response to the previous post, one player said:

“The flawed argument ‘We complained for this and now we complain about the solution’ is such a tired and wrong argument...People who were previously ‘for’ said solution may have turned against it when the implementation turned out the be pathetically flawed...I never asked for more people in zones and I hate [cross-realm zones]...Not everyone finds mouth frothing competition to be fun or compelling gameplay...Bring back real elites [monsters that require ‘making friends’].”

The latter group longed for the game as it once was, and believed that cross-realm zones were one symptom of a larger systemic issue affecting social experience. For example, the player above mentioned elements of leveling that required players to collaborate with one another, which led to “making friends.” Another emphasized behavior changes after cross-realm zones:

“It’s like everyone is in their own world. I realize they are probably working on their quests or whatever... but it used to be you said ‘hi’ they would at least most of the time acknowledge you.”

Many players felt that cross-realm zones removed a sense of realm community, which detracted from the social experience:
“People aren’t connected to there server anymore ever since the big merge. You would hardly see the same people since they are from different servers so that’s why people are anti-social this days. Back then when it was just your server it felt like home and it felt like a community since you interacted with the same people on that server only.”

Other players tried to socialize with their new cross-realm counterparts, but found that they were unable to interact through activities such as trading game items. One player listed specific altruistic behaviors that he had previously performed through trading, but no longer could: “C’mom, I can’t even: 1) Give them that [rare item] that would benefit them more me, which I just looted 2) Give them some [low level] health/mana [potion] 3) Give them a spot of cash if they need it.” Sharing game money and beneficial items was no longer possible. Cross-realm zones removed critical social affordances such as trading between players that cemented social bonds.

In September 2012, a Blizzard Community Manager listed several known problems with cross-realm zones, including “lack of realm community.” However, instead of mentioning concerns such as decreased communication and collaboration, the Community Manager only addressed population size and competition for resources:

“We understand that players are concerned about [cross-realm zones] potentially impacting the sense of community. Cross-realm zones were intended to make lower level zones feel less empty, but may also impact other more populated zones. With more populated areas, we’re aware of concerns over increased competition for resource[s] as well as quest[s] and rare [enemies]. This is something that we’re in the process of evaluating.”

Cross-realm zones decreased opportunities for realm-based interactions and limited the social experiences possible for cross-realm players.

5.3. Social Experiences in Moonfall

At its peak in mid-2014, the Moonfall 4 Life group had grown to over 1,100 members through invitations of friends and friends-of-friends. At the time of writing, the group had over 970 members. Our survey shows that a majority (83%) began playing during Vanilla WoW (2004–2006), and 16% during the first expansion (2007–2008). Only 1% began after 2008.

Roughly half of the Moonfall group no longer had active World of Warcraft accounts, and many of those who did had created characters on new realms or moved their characters to different realms. If a majority of the group either no longer played the game or no longer played on Moonfall, why did they choose to join the group? Our data suggest that they joined the Facebook group because past social experiences created a sense of community to which players were still attached. One player summarized what many in the group felt—as evidenced by the number of “likes” on the Facebook post—“I feel like, it was more than just the game. It was the community. The people who we’ve built a bond/relationship with was what made the game fun. I know that’s what made me keep on playing.”

Members reminisced about shared experiences by posting screenshots, videos, cached web pages, and stories about events from times when they had played together. The most common sentiment across posts was that the players missed each other: “I hate the fact I actually miss you assholes.” Another wrote: “my god… so many people and so many memories on this post. I LOVE you all.”

To restore the sense of community, some members started threads to share and update personal information. In one thread, a player asked:

“Hey Moonfall! What is it that you DO for life right now? Didja get married and have kids? Finish college? Graduate high school (for the youngin’s). What do I do? I am a cook at a catering place and a swanky business club, and I will be finishing up culinary school with an AS and 4 certifications in the fall. Oh yes.”

The thread received over 250 replies. Members updated each other on their lives, commented on others’ updates, and remarked on accomplishments. Several couples had married. Some had begun their relationships when they met on Moonfall (see [25,31,40] on emotional connection in online games). One player posted: “Satanika = Finished my psychology degree, married to [offline name] AKA Trollee [another player from the realm], hahahaha, with two kiddos!” Some posts addressed academic experiences and careers:

“Finished my Bachelor's in Psychology from University of Maine in December and now am starting work full time as a Behavioral Health Professional in a couple weeks. Basically I hang out with kids with developmental issues like autism etc and work with their family to have them reach goals and improve their behavior.”

Many replies were congratulatory, and celebrated the achievements of the community. However, not all threads were light-hearted. One player created a thread commemorating deceased players from the realm: “Let’s not forget absent friends who passed on, as well: Lotion/Toomer – [offline name] | Cay – [offline name] Game on friends.” Other players chimed in through the comments: “I believe Furzi
passed away too,” “Ariok as well.” For some, this was the first they had heard of their online friends’ deaths. The thread became a place to share memories of those who had died: “From time to time I think bout Ariok.. I used to run around Stormwind just so I can find him and [role play] walk towards him on the Worgen travel form.. He used to always freak out about that. Haha.” Many players posted media that included the deceased to remember them and share their experiences with others from the realm.

Moonfall players’ social experiences facilitated multi-year friendships, and sometimes romantic relationships. Many joined the group to continue interacting with people who lived far away, and who perhaps they had never met in person. Though many members of Moonfall 4 Life no longer played World of Warcraft, the stories they told and media they shared showed that the game created meaningful social experience and positive memories.

6. Discussion

When World of Warcraft was released, players needed to form social connections to prosper in the game. Players maintained relationships with others to play, and also, in many cases, because the friendships they developed were important to them [26,28,38].

Changes like Group Finder and cross-realm zones encouraged players to be self-reliant and perform activities by themselves. “Solo play,” or playing alone, has always been part of the game [20], but WoW’s affordances now nudge players toward soloing, when the opposite was true in the past. Recent research suggests there has been a surge in soloing as changes made aspects of play easier [28]. It might seem that this is what players want, and some do, but the significant drop in player subscriptions suggests that many players are not seeking an experience void of socializing.

It may seem strange that there is a gap between when Blizzard introduced Group Finder and cross-realm zones and when players began complaining. But there will never be instantaneous understanding of the implications of a change. Players who do not like a change may leave the game, while those who stay experience and discuss the negative effects of the changes. Players who may prefer “old school” methods of play are forced to adopt new technologies because they become the norm.

It is unclear whether Blizzard developers considered the potential impact on social experience when implementing changes such as Group Finder and cross-realm zones. The matter could be resolved if we had more data, but the relevant questions are difficult to ask of developers who do not have the time or inclination to answer them (apart from what we can glean from forums). Group Finder, for example, solved the important problem of expediting the process of finding other group members. Even if the resulting decline in social experience had been predictable, it was probably considered a necessary evil. Perhaps the game itself disciplines players to choose efficiency—the goal of World of Warcraft is, after all, to continually attain new levels to face greater challenges. While some may wander through the virtual world at a slower pace and are happy to play that way, most seem entwined in the logic of speed the game urges; for example, after a new expansion, the first person of each character type to reach the next maximum level is heralded in the chat window for all on the realm to see. The game itself encourages speed, drive, and a competitive desire to get ahead of others. But this ethos means that players may sacrifice sociality to improve efficiency.

Some players have found ways to recreate experiences they enjoyed from older versions of the game. “Private servers” allow people to host their own version of a game by using proprietary software [9,39]. Though commercial companies do not create private servers, servers usually attempt to replicate aspects of the company’s original game. Once a private server is running, players can connect to the server and play the game it emulates for free. Many people actively play on private servers even though Blizzard forbids them in WoW’s Terms of Service. To circumvent copyright laws, most private servers are hosted from Europe where it is more difficult to punish violations of The United States’ laws. Private servers are generally created and administered by small, dedicated development teams that spend countless hours coding, scripting, and debugging their servers to ensure smooth play. While private servers have existed since the release of the first WoW expansion in 2007, more have appeared over the last few years [39]. One private server, “Nostalrius Begins,” has attempted to recreate a version of Vanilla WoW as it was in 2004. Nostalrius Begins has had over 9,500 players online concurrently, which is comparable to the populations of WoW servers hosted by Blizzard.

As the number of private servers increases, the number of active World of Warcraft subscriptions decreases [39]. In their most recent quarterly report, Blizzard reported that the number of WoW subscriptions had decreased by 2.9 million since the last quarterly report [43]. Some may argue that Blizzard’s changes “appeal to a broader audience” and will attract more people to their game. However, that does not seem to be the case, as the numbers
clearly show. While we cannot assert a causal relationship between changes made to World of Warcraft and the declining number of subscriptions, our findings show that players are still complaining about the social experience. There is a target audience whose desires for a particular kind of gaming experience are not being met. Players are taking matters into their own hands by seeking out private servers or simply leaving the game. With private servers, players have revived an instantiation of WoW in which the people mattered as people, and social life was prized.

Still, Nostalrius Begins’ population pales in comparison to the number of current World of Warcraft subscriptions. Private servers are a niche form of resistance. Most people do not know about private servers, and others avoid them because they violate Blizzard’s Terms of Service. Many private servers allow players to donate real money for items in the game, which allows server hosts to generate revenue from Blizzard’s intellectual property. In 2010, Blizzard won $88 million in a lawsuit against a private server owner. According to the judge’s order, “[the] Defendant’s PayPal account received $3,052,339 in gross revenues [from the private server]” [18]. But the potential for legal recourse has not reduced the popularity of private servers. As private servers have gotten closer to replicating the original WoW experience, they have attracted more players and garnered media attention [18,39].

Because our access was limited to North American and English-based European forum posts, our results may not generalize to the entire population of WoW. However, we are not attempting to generalize these results to the 7.1 million World of Warcraft players. Instead, we found and analyzed an important thread of social experience found across forums, in-game experience, and Moonfall 4 Life. Given what we have learned about social affordances in World of Warcraft, we argue that game developers should consider alternative worlds for different kinds of play. World of Warcraft realms are already specialized to accommodate certain play styles. For example, “Player versus Player” (PvP) realms allow for spontaneous combat between players where one player kills another. Some players love the sense of danger and excitement, while others loathe constantly being on the lookout to avoid being killed. Blizzard provides support for both kinds of player. We advocate for the development of some realms that remove cross-realm aspects of the game, such as cross-realm zones and Group Finder. Those interested in pursuing social interactions with their fellow players and developing a realm community could select these servers, while players interested in solo play or fast, efficient progress in the game, could select others. Providing more options accommodates different play styles and affords a range of social experiences.

We assert that given that online communities are a significant source of social life in the contemporary world, as we saw with the Moonfall 4 Life group (and as has been amply documented in the literature [3,11,25,28,29,32,33,36,38]), developers should be flexible about maintaining different kinds of worlds to accommodate different kinds of players. World of Warcraft’s player community demonstrates that there is a demand for worlds that encourage, and even reward, collaborating and socializing. Creating a virtual world that provides players with the optimal ratio of challenge, social experience, and competition is not an easy task, but by offering different kinds of worlds, developers can cater to broader audiences.

8. Conclusion

Through qualitative analyses of forum posts, we examined players’ social experiences after changes to World of Warcraft that altered the game’s social affordances. We investigated Group Finder and cross-realm zones to demonstrate that changes to social affordances disappointed many players. We documented the depth of social experience by studying posts and behaviors on Moonfall 4 Life, a community of veteran World of Warcraft players that reconvened outside of the game to sustain social relationships and reminisce about their time together.

We discussed the rising popularity of private servers as player-controlled versions of a game, which constitute a form of resistance against the play experience WoW currently offers. Changes that affect the social affordances of a game have important implications for social experience. We hope that developers consider offering different versions of virtual worlds to accommodate varied player interests and to broaden social experience.

8. References
