

THE LOSS OF SOCIABILITY ONLINE IN MMORPGS AS SEEN THROUGH FINAL FANTASY XI: ONLINE

NICOLAS LALONE

Abstract

The rise of toxic gaming culture occurs in concurrence with the slow loss of technological affordances that promote sociality and cooperation in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPG). Between 2004 – 2013, *World of Warcraft* slowly removed the need for players to interact with one another. This resulted in other MMORPGs following suit with existing MMORPGs left to figure out how to deal with this new style of play. This case study examines the patch notes and *FFXI* software history of the popular MMORPG called *Final Fantasy XI Online (FFXI)*. This MMORPG is unique as it was a game whose systems forced cooperation and reliance on other people. How *FFXI* changed from forced human-to-human reliance to a single-player experience is a unique case study reflecting the broader design trends in socially-oriented online play. By explicating these features, this case study provides useful context the study of the loss of cooperation and sociability in online gaming.

Introduction

In “Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States,” the authors outline a process through which the users of a system help to shape a system (Kline & Pinch, 1996). Concurrent to shaping that system, unanticipated consequences due to the differences among those users shape and reshape certain aspects of the artifact around which the socio-technical system is formed. A similar confrontation is occurring in and around the socio-technical systems that make up the Internet. Different types of people on the Internet have different interpretations about what the Internet is for and each act and are acted upon as different types of designers identify and design for different types of users.

Nowhere is this confrontation more historically evident than in the tensions between players who want to play games by themselves (solo players) and players who want to play video games with others. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) first came to exist during the height of utopian thinking about the Internet (Nakamura, 2013) and slowly declined in sales, population, and cultural power (Bartle, 2016). Their slow decline as exhibited by their affordances over time provides

an excellent case study of the antagonism between players who wish to be alone, players who wish to play with others, and the consequences of designers trying to mediate those desires.

MMORPGs at their height often represented the promise of cooperation, of exploration and cultural tourism, and the infinity of possibilities Internet technology (Bartle, 2016; Brookey, 2009). Starting in or around 2005, MMORPGs began to slowly remove the, “multiplayer” affordances of their gameplay. As results, MMORPGS became mostly single-player experiences in both design and affordance (Crenshaw et al., 2017; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016).

The sociality and necessary teamwork of MMORPGs once heralded an explosion of game- related academia that has unfortunately become little more than a “what could have been” for online gaming (e.g. (Castronova, 2008; Consalvo, 2009; Huber, 2007; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2009)). Much of this original research has been replaced with, “the rise of toxic player cultures” and how to deal with them (e.g. (Consalvo, 2012; Massanari, 2017; Paul, 2018)). The trend of solo-play with more-than-optional social content has become a norm in MMORPGs. Much of the history of how and what transpired in the hugely popular massively multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy XI Online* can be seen in patch notes. By tracing patch notes and software affordance changes, it is possible to compare and contrast what is changed in each patch as well as the consequences of those activities. This research represents a brief case study about the loss of social demands for players in *Final Fantasy XI Online (FFXI)*.

Final Fantasy XI Online

FFXI is Square-Enix’s MMORPG set in a fictional world called Vana’diel. This game was released in 2002 in Japan and 2003 worldwide. Vana’diel was intended to be explored via the Playstation 2 game console and was then ported to the person computer. Eventually, *FFXI* would also be ported to the XBOX 360. Each version of the game connected to the same network of servers and so, *FFXI* was cross-cultural, cross-platform, and perpetually on. The world of Vana’diel was a product of its era as it exhibited the harshness of *Everquest* and other MMORPGs at the time with a few exceptions.

First, no player could get past level 11 or 12 (of 75) by themselves. Players were forced to rely on each other gather in organized parties meant to amass experience points, kill special monsters for equipment, and to work together to make money. Failure that resulted in a character’s death was punished harshly with experience point loss. This often resulted in a loss of experience points that could decrease a player’s level and require a few of hours of work to regain. The increased reliance on other players also increase the pressure to perform as was often heralded as both a benefit and detriment to *FFXI*’s popularity (Consalvo, 2009).

During its height, *FFXI* reported over 500,000 subscriptions and was one of the most popular MMORPGs between 2004-2007 (Consalvo, 2009). *FFXI*’s decline began after the release of *World of Warcraft (WoW)* but has remained an active and subscription only game in 2018.

Players pay \$12.95 a month to access their characters. Blizzard Entertainment’s successes with the *Warcraft* franchise paired with the a customizable, PC-oriented interface, control schema, and gameplay has no doubt been responsible for persistent player population decline. To date, subscriptions seem to have dwindled from over 500,000 down to 200,000 according to the unofficial numbers given on the Final Fantasy XI Auction House website: ffxiah.com.

While the game's population dwindled and companies like Blizzard Entertainment began to remove social affordances in their game, *FFXI*'s designers were forced to contend with a gaming atmosphere that was at odds, almost opposite of what it was released as. The designers of *FFXI* were forced to figure out how to meet player-demand for increasingly solo play. I extend research on MMORPG by presenting an historical overview of how the MMORPG *FFXI* met design trends to stay viable in the current gaming climate.

The slow shift to automation

The fulcrum upon which the slow shift to solo-play rests is the release of *World of Warcraft* in late 2004 (Crenshaw et al., 2017). Up until this time, *FFXI* rested on 3 specific demands for players:

1. No one could play alone.
2. Groups had to be balanced around the "trinity" of tank, damage, support (see: (Green, 2009))
3. The world was perpetual and tied to a 21-24-hour window for important, equipment generating monsters.

Through the first demand, players had to interact with one another and through that interaction, they had to discuss the needs of their allegiance within the particular task. Whether through guilds or simple XP parties the software of *FFXI* forced players to communicate and be partners. XP Parties were always 6 players, 1 tank, 1 or 2 support players, and the rest as damage dealers. This balance could not be shifted away from without supreme levels of effort.

The second demand forced players to broaden their available toolset. While some players would only focus on "damage" types of jobs for their character, they were the majority. Further, the game's patch system would wildly swing the demand for certain kinds of damage-jobs. This meant that players were always leveling new jobs and that their desire to play a certain kind of job was not always met.

Finally, the third demand forced players to navigate complex, large group dynamics. If players wished to obtain high level gear, then they had to team up with 12-18 or more (up to 64) other individuals plus backup characters in order to defeat those monsters that generated that equipment randomly once defeated. Further, some of these monsters only appeared in-world once a day between 21-24 hours. If your group did not claim that monster that day, players were left only with the opportunity to watch other players defeat that monster. This was the *FFXI* before *WoW*.

The Impact of WoW

The impact of the release of *WoW* can first be seen in *FFXI* shortly after its release. *WoW* offered more radical player interaction with constantly on Player versus Player action and the designers were quick to patch troublesome behaviors. For example, the *WoW* spell mind control was often used when *WoW* was released to take over a character and send them falling to their death. In July of 2005, *FFXI*'s designers first released new content that would help players achieve more alone. The "Adventuring Fellow" or automated, companion NPC allowed adventurers to gain experience points by themselves at low level and generally helped to make the early leveling experience much faster and less punishing. Further, these adventuring fellows could allow certain kinds of jobs the ability to mediate the complex tanking systems in order to do much more difficult content on their own.

Also in 2005, players of *WoW* met with the plague event. The worldwide plague that heralded the coming of the first expansion brought consequences and dynamic action that players could not experience in *FFXI* (Reimer, 2005; Ward, 2005). The press coverage of the event provided a boost to *WoW* that was additionally met by the release of the successful *The Burning Crusade* in 2007. Between 2006 and 2008, *FFXI* and *WoW* kept a schedule of consistent content for players to engage. This meant that players played the game the way that it was created between these years. However, *FFXI*'s players were beginning to experience issues within game.

For players in *FFXI*, the longevity of the players who were still in game paired with loss of friends and the sudden melding of Linkshells (Guilds in *FFXI*) began to make playing a little more difficult. For players in 2007, it started to become difficult to find people to gain experience points with for low-level jobs. This thinning of low-level groups also made it more difficult for new players to find anyone to play with.

To remedy the growing population issues, *FFXI*'s designers introduced the "Level Sync" feature in September of 2009. This feature allowed for "XP Parties" to join together regardless of their job's level and gain experience points equivalent to their party's needs. Of interest for this system was the way that the system mediated the existing equipment for each player. Much of the math of the sync was, and still largely is unknown. Different types of jobs and gear would result in different levels of power for different jobs. This would drive the sales of "level appropriate" gear and influence the economy of *FFXI*.

Also during 2009, *World of Warcraft* players were introduced to a new feature (eventually called Dungeon Finder (Crenshaw et al., 2017; Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016). This feature allowed players to simply press a button, declare their role, and wait for an algorithm to find other players and assemble them for a dungeon. Over the next year, *WoW* would refine this tool until it began to assemble players for group-based content across multiple servers.

Also in 2010, the designers of *FFXI* did the unthinkable, they raised the level cap of the game past level 75. Up until this time, the entire world was attuned to the math of Level 75 main jobs with level 34 sub job abilities. When the designers of *FFIX* released the level 75 level cap to first 80 and then to level 99 by the end of 2011, the resulting ability for players to do things on their own increased the possibilities for adventure inside the world of Vana'diel.

The final maximum level of 99 was paired with the removal of the "perpetual" aspect of *FFXI*. The always on, 21-24 hours system for hunting rare monsters was removed. The system put in its place allowed players to obtain an item that they traded to a spot in the floor where the monster used to spawn. Once traded, the monster was spawn and was claimed for the player who traded the item. Shifts to solo play seemed to be happening to *WoW* as well.

In 2011, Blizzard Entertainment enhanced their Dungeon Finder tool and opened it up for raids. Because Raiding often represented the most elite type of play, the opening of a raiding algorithmic assembly tool also required raids themselves to be re-designed. Raiding was generally weakened. The difficulty of the raids in *WoW* was then tiered. Players could still play the elite level of raids but in the open-raiding system, players could obtain reasonable gear and still be competitive. These features greatly weakened the level-based content as players in *WoW* no longer needed to leave town

or walk anywhere. They could simply level up without leaving the spot they logged in on. In *FFXI*, the lowering social needs for players to play *FFXI* would get a boost with the release of the Trust Initiative.

The Trust Initiative began in late 2013. What this system did was remarkable. The Trust Initiative allowed for players to obtain powerful spells that could summon “Alter-Egos” of popular in-game NPCs. These NPCs would reflect the current level of the player who summoned them thus allowing for players to perpetually be inside an XP party that was balanced and powerful. This was later paired with an increase in the experience points per monster. Before the level cap was raised to 80, the average experience points per hour was perhaps around 2-5000 (level 74 – level 75 required around 43000 xp). Since its release, the Trust Initiative has seen constant improvements, edits, and allowances that allow for *FFXI* players to accomplish by themselves what used to require 6, 12, 18, or more players to accomplish in the past.

Discussion

The present research reflects an historical overview of the features of *FFXI* that correlate to the loss of sociability in similar games like *WoW*. This slow loss of sociability can also be seen in games *Star Wars Galaxies* through its infamous “New Game Enhancement” patch (Lees, 2005). *FFXI* was built around the demands for players to interact with one another. The result of the trend of a loss of sociability is that *FFXI* itself should have closed down, moved on. A brief chronological history of patches and patch notes (from *WoW* and *FFXI*) can be found in Figure 1 at the end of this paper.

However, the patch notes allow interested researchers to follow how game affordances shift. Affordances in games like MMORPGs serve as a vehicle through which player community is formed, how player community and social capital are enforced, and how players recognize one another. By highlighting these changes between 2005 and 2013, the tangential aspects of a loss of the need for social capital can not only be witnessed but experienced by logging in to the game.

Conclusion

This case study serves as “for your consideration” when giving thought to toxic online behaviors as the players who remain in *FFXI* still adhere to that sociality as best as the software allows.

The overwhelming nature of research surrounding these toxic cultures often obfuscates those individuals who have remained with the games that represented the possibilities of online cooperation since their creation.

Interestingly, these developments in *FFXI* occur in concurrence with the loss of sociability in *World of Warcraft* demonstrated in Crenshaw and Nardi (2016). This is further exemplified in Crenshaw et al. (2017) and Consalvo (2013). More research is needed about *FFXI*'s version of private game servers (e.g. The DarkStar Project) which often feature the re-instatement of the various requisite needs for sociability that was required in-game before *WoW*'s release.

Additional work that examines the concurrence of the history of the DarkStar Project (*FFXI*'s private server software), the History of *WoW*'s private servers, and the nature of methods for MMORPG preservation is sorely needed.

As of 2016, *FFXI* has removed support for their original console releases marking the end of official

Playstation 2 development. While console support has been removed, Square-Enix has noted that they will continue to provide smaller-releases but still new content for the game as long as players continue to support it. With the loss of the need for sociability, the trade-off has been that the game has a means through which to continue into the unforeseeable future. *FFXI* remains one of the only original “golden age” MMORPG that has remained with a subscription. In fact, the subscription has not changed since the game was created aside from a number of storage-related additional charges one can apply to their account. That the game survives on subscriptions should also be examined.

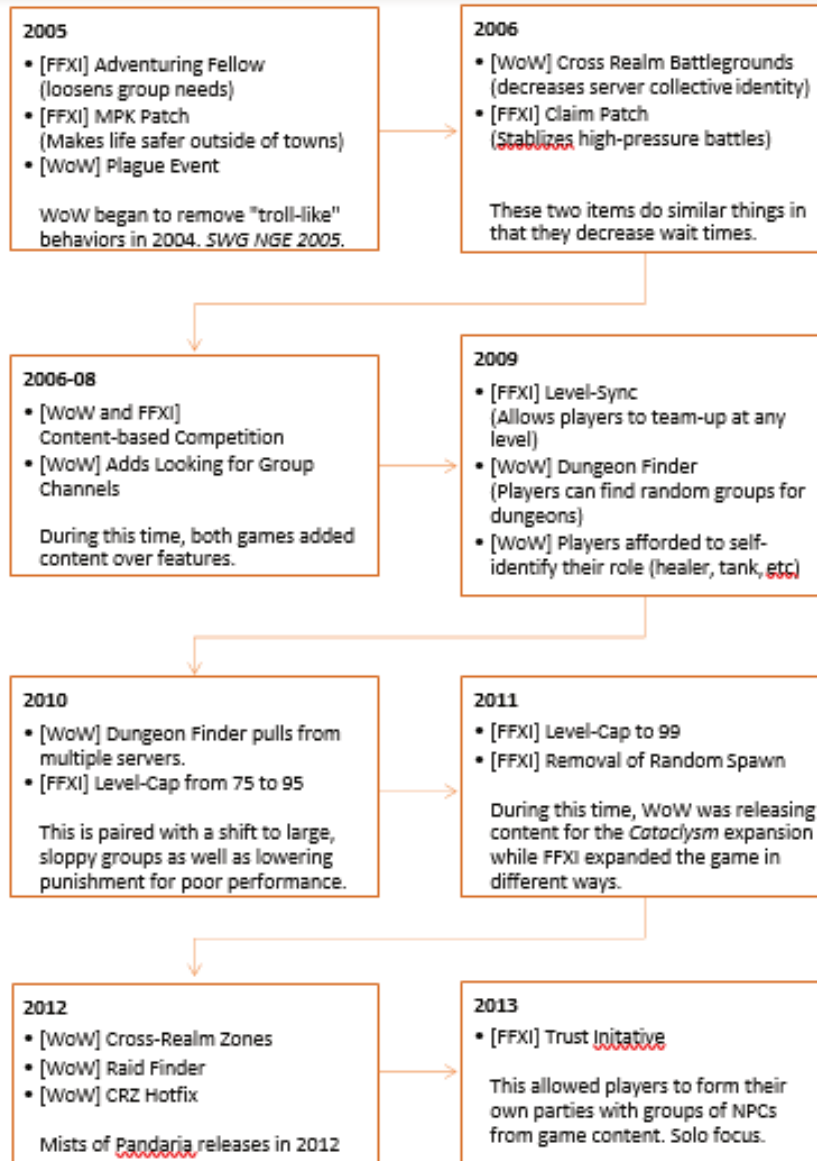


Figure 1 – Social Affordances Changes Between FFXI and WoW (2004-2013)

Links to Patch Notes:

Adventuring Fellow: July 2005:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/update/ff11us/20050715Pm01B1/detail.html>

MPK Patch: December 2005:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/update/ff11us/20051213fMt7e1/detail.html>

Claim Patch: April 2006:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/update/ff11us/2006041883vPh1/detail.html>

2006 – 2009: Attempts to add more content, more features, more PC Friendliness, more polish. Competition against WoW as norm.

Level-Sync: September 2009:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/verup/ff11us/detail/3668/detail.html>

Starting in 2010, FFXI begins to move toward large-group activities. The Abysea expansion is the final expression of “multiplayerness” and massive group orientation.

Removal of level caps:

to level 80: June 2010:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/verup/ff11us/detail/5571/detail.html>

to level 85: September 2010:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/verup/ff11us/detail/5835/detail.html>

to level 90: December 2010:

<http://www.playonline.com/pcd/verup/ff11us/detail/6035/detail.html>

to level 95: September 2011:

<http://forum.square-enix.com/ffxi/threads/15044>

to 99: November 2011:

<http://forum.square-enix.com/ffxi/threads/17017>

Random Spawn to ???: April 2011:

<http://forum.square-enix.com/ffxi/threads/5774>

Trust Initiative: December 2013:

<http://forum.square-enix.com/ffxi/threads/38761#post482610>

For a discussion of *World of Warcraft's* social affordances and how they have changed over time, please refer to: Crenshaw et al. (2017) or Crenshaw (2017). For a discussion of the sociability of “vanilla” or original *WoW*, I suggest Chen (2010).

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