Queue'd Up:
The Functioning of Randomized Groups in World of Warcraft

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Introduction

World of Warcraft has risen to critical success since its release in November of 2004 (Zenke, 2008). The Guinness Book of World Records lists *World of Warcraft* (WoW) as the most popular Massive Online Multiplayer game as well as holding the record for most subscribers of any online game in the world. Since its inception in 2004, *WoW* has gone through many stages in game play development. Through additions such as new dungeons for adventurers to explore or battle arenas for players to compete against one another, Blizzard, the developer of *World of Warcraft*, has done the best they can to keep the game fresh and interesting for the people who pay monthly for their game.

World of Warcraft has left a substantial footprint when it comes to online gaming. Nearly every new game in the genre attempts to live up to the standards that *WoW* has set and none have come even remotely close, judging solely based on subscriptions. Recently, a new Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) called *Star Wars: The Old Republic* was released and, although having a great deal of success in its own right, has still failed to reach the subscribership of *WoW* (Schiesel, 2011). By having the largest player base in

MMORPG's, *World of Warcraft* becomes the ideal setting to understand the development of communication within small groups in online virtual worlds.

There are many different online multiplayer games, ranging from shooters to roleplaying games. Each genre of game has its own unique traits when it comes to the player base that is participating in the different virtual worlds. The players of *World of Warcraft* have roots in many different games, whether they started playing *WoW* from the time it was released or if they joined up years later - by using this specific game as a baseline and applying Bruce Tuckman's popular model of group communication, we can distinguish the different stages of group communication within online virtual worlds.

Although *WoW* can be played without ever entering a group, is it highly unlikely due to the nature of an MMORPG. One of the main components of any online game is the ability to play with other people; otherwise, there would be no reason to allow online gameplay. From the very first moments of entering *World of Warcraft,* players have the ability to group with one another; this ability lasts until the very end of the game where the only goals left are ones that involve grouping with one another to accomplish the largest tasks.

The importance of group interaction in *World of Warcraft* allows for the analysis of group dynamics that occur in online gameplay. Identifying the different stages of development a group experiences in an online game, can lead to a better understanding of what makes a group work well together. It is not uncommon for online groups to fall apart due to poor group communication. By examining each stage individually and searching for new avenues of research into these specified areas, a better understanding of how to create a functional, working group within these environments may be gained.

Background

Online gaming is obviously a product of the internet generation, however, the pivotal social game came in 1974 with the release of Dungeons and Dragons (Radoff, 2010) – a pen and paper roleplaying game where players group together in reality to take the role of an adventurer, advance their character by slaying monsters, and progress through an intricate storyline told by the Dungeon Master (the player who runs the game and crafts the story the adventurers will embark on). Although a crude description, these are, at their core, the very same mechanics seen in modern online role playing games.

Players band together to experience quests, adventures, and dungeons within the virtual world, while at the same time advancing their character and set of skills which they can bring to a group. The story is no longer told by a Dungeon Master, but crafted by the game developers who lead the players through an epic journey, in the case of *World of Warcraft,* a journey that has spanned nearly eight years. Rather than meeting once a week or month like many *Dungeon and Dragon* groups did (and still do), players can now log in to their game whenever they want and always find people to play with. One of the key aspects of *World of Warcraft* or any massive online multiplayer game is the access to people. At any given point, you can log into one of these games and interact with another person or group of people. Because of this aspect, online groups are forming and falling apart, literally 24 hours a day.

Communication is one of the core mechanics of any online game. By connecting to the internet and logging into a game service, a player is opening the communicative door with hundreds of thousands of different people. *World of Warcraft* has a built in function, known as *Dungeon Finder*, which allows a player to join a randomized group of 5 or 25 players who will make their way through a dungeon in order to fight an end boss and all his minions along the way. These are commonly referred to as instances, raids or dungeons. Communication occurs in a variety of ways within these random groups. The most common is

the in-game chat method; however, given the shared knowledge of most dungeons there is not a lot of text based discourse. In some of the more complex instances, specifically the 25-man raids, third party Voiceover IP (VoIP) programs are generally used to facilitate communication. These programs allow for players to speak with one another from anywhere in the world by simply downloading a program and connecting to a server. Ventrilo and Teamspeak are two of the most commonly used VoIP programs in gaming. In many cases, players will connect to one another's servers in order to just listen and take direction. It is not always the case that everyone must be able to speak, but listening for direction can be imperative. When adding this dynamic into communication within random groups, we can normally identify a group leader more clearly. I have also begun identifying a series of nonverbal cues that *WoW* players have developed. By positioning their character a certain way, using emotes, or using character movement (strafing, running back and forth, spinning), a player can communicate specific things that others could understand – this is a subject I have recently began more research on.

Another option for players is the 10-player dungeons, but these groups must be put together through manual means, such as by asking people to join their group. The level of randomness in these groups is far less and the stages of development are slightly different due to predetermined leadership, which can affect the development of a group as will be explained later in the paper. The amount of players it takes to move through one of these instances is represented by the level of difficulty as well. For example, a 5-player instance is not as difficult as a 25-player instance in terms of coordinating and group effort. There are other factors that can play a role in the difficulty of an instance, such as player skill and character advancement; however, the effect of these two factors is minimal on the group development process. The main objective of this article is to focus on the communicative process and how it unfolds in these random groups.

Method

Having spent more than 10 years playing online multiplayer games and six years of *World of Warcraft* has led me to the observe the following stages in full effect. To confirm the following stages, I have also consulted with others who have spent an abundant amount of time within the confines of the virtual world. By outlining the different stages a randomly generated group will experience, we leave the door open for further research and discovery into the dynamics of online game play. I have also applied research in related fields, such as group decision making and identity formation, to the context of online group development. When dealing with randomly generated ad hoc groups, the decision making process and the assumptions the group members have of one another can affect how the group develops.

Bruce Tuckman's Stages of Group Development is a highly regarded model for small group communication. In the case of online games, the different stages of his model (forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning) (Tuckman, 1965) can be applied to group development; however, game design features may bring forth limitations of the model due to its broad view. When we take shared knowledge and the randomness of group members, deeper analysis into the stages is necessary for full understanding. By using the broad idea of the Tuckman model and applying my own research and findings, I have evaluated the stages of online group development between players who are randomly placed in a group.

Analysis

Forming/Disclosure

When using the *Random Dungeon Finder* to be paired with other players, the group is formed once all the group slots have been filled. From there, the group members are transported to the dungeon that they will be working together to conquer. I put

the forming and disclosure stage together because disclosure happens right away with online groups. As soon as group members are able to see who they are grouped with, the first impression given (Smith, 2006) is through the name a player has chosen for their character. Players are able to name their characters almost anything that they would like, and the thoughtfulness or lack thereof put into a name usually calls for assumptions from other players. For example, individuals may assume a player named "CHEEZBIZKIT" would be less reliable than "Lunastar." The first impression given off is not binding, but it can play a role in how players view one another. Along the same lines, the visual representation of a player's character can matter as well (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2010). If a player goes against norms and goes out of their way to make their character look strange, funny, or just different – it may play a role in the judgments others pass based on how this player will act. These first impressions may or may not have a lasting impression on the group and their success. In the larger instances (10 or 25 person groups) there is more room for error in the strategies that are used to complete tasks. This is because other group members can assist each other in areas where one may be lacking. Therefore, in larger dungeons, first impressions may not have as much of an effect.

Once the group becomes oriented, discussion occurs between the members to gauge the level of experience each individual has. Generally, a group has a level of shared knowledge of the particular dungeon they are faced with; most of the disclosure is distinguishing who has completed the dungeon and who has not. This information can be derived from a person's silence or the admission of not having the same level of experience as the others. For example, one of the videos analyzed for this research was a 25-man raid attempting *The Dragon Soul* instance for the first time on test servers prior to a patch. In this particular case, the raid was completely new to everyone and the only shared knowledge was based off the little information that was available on the internet at the time. As the group is loaded into the dungeon, one player (*Celiar*) quickly

began giving direction while the rest of the raid remained silent. Since there were no other options given, no other players contested *Celiar*, it was assumed he had the most knowledge of the encounter; thus allowing for him to emerge as the leader of this group of players.

Emergent Leadership

A leader is assumed after the disclosure stage. Leadership is indicated through a function in game that randomly appoints a leader, but this is more titular than anything else. Through the disclosure of past conquests in the game, a leader emerges and becomes the organizer of how the group will proceed with a task. It is not always verbalized or codified who the group leader is, but as the group functions as a team, it is clear through the interactions as to who is in charge. More often than not, the leader is the most vocal about what the group should be doing, how they should be doing it, and usually is not challenged. In most cases, players are fine with one person directing their group because of the shared understanding of the tasks. When things are going well, this leadership is rarely challenged. It is not until the group begins to falter or fail at their task that their role as leader is challenged.

Because of the need for shared knowledge of dungeons and the strategies to complete the tasks, the leadership is very much a directing role. Leadership being reduced to direction at times is largely due to theorycrafting, which is the quantifying of game mechanics in order to maximize player potential (WoWWiki, 2011). Players are expected to have a deep understanding of their character - this is due to the extensive amount of information available on each playable class/race in the game. With this sort of information available, the leadership role is changed to a directing role because players are assumed to understand their class and how to play it without any instruction. This type of quantification allows players performance to be based on in game stat counters (Ask, 2011) often called DPS meters. Therefore, the leader of a group must only ensure that everyone understands the basic mechanics of a encounter

and watch the stat counters to ensure group members are performing adequately. These benchmarks include but are not limited to: Damage Per Second, Healing Per Second, Overall Damage, and Overall Healing. These statistical measures have risen out of theorycrafting and a reliance on quantifiable evidence for what will work best in any given encounter. More often than not, the player who emerges as the leader in a group will have an advanced understanding of these benchmarks. Theorycrafting has allowed for players to fine tune their characters to their maximum potential, assuming they are willing to take the time to play the way someone else has dictated to them. However there are multiple ways to complete a goal in a dungeon, and the person who has risen to the rank of group leader is the one who decides what would be best for the group. This player will also relay any information needed to those who do not have the same level of experience to make sure everyone is on the same page; all of this ties together into the quality of leadership. The leader of the group has the ability to influence the attitude of the group (Heise, 1977). If the group leader is exuding a negative attitude it will be reflected by the members of the group. Strong communication skills and the ability to facilitate group cohesion are imperative for leadership in virtual worlds.

Execution

The execution stage is where shared knowledge and understanding is most prevalent. By the time players begin using the group finding tool extensively, they have played the game for a significant amount of time. In most cases, players are aware of the core game mechanics and how to manipulate them in order to achieve their goals. Understanding the goal that the group is trying to accomplish and simply knowing how to play their chosen character correctly are two parts of the shared understanding players must have in order to execute their strategy without any setbacks.

There is also an abundance of outside sources players may use to help further the shared knowledge. Wikipedia pages, tutorial videos, and various game guides are all available to

players and help to create a shared understanding of *WoW*. There are several ways of achieving different goals throughout the game; however, they are rarely explored due to the shared understanding of the different tasks. Once a group of players, usually not randomly generated, has accomplished a goal efficiently and share their experience – the manner in which they accomplished the goal becomes the norm. By sharing their experience on YouTube, different websites, or databases – they create an understanding of how a task is to be completed.

Due to the wealth of information that is available to players, they have learned how to adapt to almost any situation. As discussed earlier, the idea of theorycrafting is simply one way players have learned to manipulate the game. By breaking the skills and attributes down into numbers and formulating equations, players have found ways to maximize their character's potential. It is not uncommon for players to obtain pieces of gear that may seem trivial to a novice player, but when in the reality of the game, this is the best possible piece of equipment a player could have. This type of manipulation of the attribute system along with an understanding of a skill rotation (the order in which players use their skills to maximize their output), allows for players to be an asset to their group by executing to their fullest potential. The other ways player have adapted in order to achieve goals is through strategizing dungeon encounters. Countless hours are spent inside instances by dedicated players in order to determine the most efficient way to "down" a boss. The trial and error process of a new encounter can take days, weeks, or even months for a well-organized group to overcome. Vodka, a top US raiding guild, spent well over a month attempting to defeat *Deathwing*. It was a long process of learning to understanding the mechanics of the encounter, learning how to use all the available resources in their favor, and then relying on one another in order to execute systematically in order to defeat the boss (Grafarion, 2012).

To use an example from my own experience - back when *Ulduar* was first released one of the bosses, *Igniss the Furnace*

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Master, was incredibly difficult to get past. At that time many groups were merely skipping him and moving on to more obtainable bosses. However, my guild spent was determined to be the first on the server to kill this particular boss. We had spent hours upon hours testing different methods. We would randomly place *Igniss* in different locations, we would try different group combinations, we would try different spells. At this point it was still very early in *Ulduar's* release and there was not a whole lot of information on how to beat *Igniss*, so a lot of what we were doing was trial and error. It took nearly a full week of attempting to kill him before we finally were able to overcome. In the end, we tested and tried different approaches until we figured out what was working for our group. We tested, probably, hundreds of different methods and combinations in order to find the best way that worked for us. What made the difference is that we learned a specific skilled used by Hunters could alleviate the duration of one of *Igniss'* abilities, which ultimately ended up being the turning point for our group.

The perseverance of groups such as the aforementioned is the way players expand their knowledge of the game. They gain better understanding of the mechanics and how to use them in their favor. When organized groups take the time to share their experience to the *WoW* community, they allow for players to advance themselves and each other because there is a baseline of understanding. In order to be an asset to the group, a player must be able to execute the basic strategies that are put forth by organized groups and mimicked by random groups.

Most players are attuned to the procedures that a group must partake in because they have a reason to do so. By not knowing how to complete a task, they are hindering their own personal character progression – whether it's earning new armor pieces or a new weapon that can help make their character stronger. The sense of achievement when completing the dungeons and the rewards that you can receive for doing so is what keeps players together and forming groups. In essence, the apex of the game is to progress your character as much as

possible – without cohesive communication within small groups, this milestone is very difficult.

It is the leader's role to direct the way in which the group will accomplish their goal, but the manner in which he does this is based on shared knowledge that the whole group is assumed to have. This is why I find the leaders to have more of a director's role than an actual leader's role since they are simply making sure everyone follows an understood plan. Due to shared knowledge and a wealth of information that is available on different goals within *WoW*, a group's leader simply has to assign tasks and make sure the group members know what to do, as opposed to continuously giving orders and direction on how each person should be playing. It is very much a laissez-faire type of leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) within the confines of *World of Warcraft.*

Breakpoints

Due to the amount of options a group has upon task completion, I find Marshall Poole's idea of breakpoints (1983) to apply quite nicely. As defined by Poole, a breakpoint is when the focus of the group is shifted, whether it is because they are moving to a different task, or a failure in a prior task and they must try again - Poole's idea of a breakpoint is just a moment within the group where they take a new direction. In regards to *World of Warcraft*, I find that upon the completion of a task, a group's focus can shift in various directions. Usually the final stage of a group model would be considered adjournment; in the case of virtual groups however, adjournment is not always the case.

That said, the most common avenue for a group is adjourning. In most cases, after a dungeon has been completed, the group will split apart and go their own way or reenter the *Dungeon Finder* queue and create a new group. Each individual has their own reasoning for leaving the group and moving on - perhaps some of their friends logged into the game and they went to group with them or sometimes players just enjoy grouping

when they need to and playing on their own the rest of the time. In most cases, members simply consider the task to be complete and move on from their group and take up other activities within the game.

Upon task completion, the group may not always adjourn. Some or all members may decide to stay together and complete another task. Given the option, if the group worked well together, players may decide to move forth into another dungeon and continue working together. In some cases, only certain members may want to stay together and continue working as a group. When this happens, the remaining group members reenter the *Dungeon Finder* or invite players they may already be acquainted with to complete their group. I have identified this breakpoint as *continuing.*

Another observed breakpoint can happen at any stage of the group process. Players may be incapable of working with one another and the group may disband prior to task completion. Occasionally there will be specific members who are unable to work with other members and they will voluntarily leave the group, allowing the remaining members to replace them with the *Dungeon Finder* tool or with people they may already be acquainted with. I have identified this breakpoint as *restructuring*.

Groups who are struggling with certain goals may decide to change the approach to the situation they are using. If a leader's direction is not working, the group may decide upon a new way of handling a task and a new leader may arise. This *power shift* usually happens very subtly and is almost unnoticeable. It is obvious to most groups when the direction of the leader is not working and it is time to try something new. The most common reason for a change in leadership is due to task failure. When a group is struggling with a task, it is up to the leader to initiate conversation as to why or simply make the changes. If the leader fails to do so, another group member usually steps in and fills the leadership role. In some cases the

ousted leader may be resentful, but will generally at least attempt the newly decided upon plan.

One of the least common breakpoints happens when players end up working so well together, that they decide to work with one another on larger scales. Within *World of Warcraft* there are large groups known as *Guilds* that are collections of people who are in pursuit of a common goal. Guilds themselves are an interesting dynamic of MMORPGs, many are formed from players grouping with random individuals and forming friendships. However, due to a more structured nature and the interpersonal relationships between guild mates, the group dynamics are much different and beyond the scope of this article. Although it is uncommon for guilds to form or players to join guilds through this form of grouping, it can happen. In most cases, players simply become friends without ever joining one another's guild or forming a new guild. Certain functions within *WoW* allow for players to add each other to a "Friends List" so they can keep in contact. I've identified this breakpoint as *forming* – whether it is friendship or a guild, the term applies nicely.

There is always the possibility of *task failure* within a group. Some goals or tasks may be too complex or challenging for a group and they simply cannot finish. *Task failure* can lead to two types of breakpoints. As identified already, *restructuring* can occur if certain members of the group decide they want to continue on with a different dungeon or *disbanding* may occur. *Disbanding* is when each group member goes their own way after *task failure*. The members that choose to disband may reenter the *Dungeon Finder* queue in hopes of being paired with different players or they may try to form their own group out of people that they know – which reduces the chances of *task failure* in most cases.

Conclusion

Online gaming has a vast audience that millions upon millions of people immerse themselves in on a daily basis. *World of Warcraft* allows us to observe how randomly generated groups

can function positively or negatively. Laying out the stages of development that these ad hoc groups participate in allows for further study into the dynamics of small group communication in virtual worlds. The stages that players go through are not something commonly thought about, although they do understand that they are going through a process. The importance of turning this tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge can make the difference in whether a group is able to function positively or negatively. When we illustrate how a group should be functioning during the stages of development, it allows for reflection and possibly more productive problem solving. If we look at each dungeon as a series of tests (Rothman, 2011), the problem solving aspect will be illuminated. Each instance has its own unique set of problems that players must learn to overcome; the way in which this is done various depending on the classes involved, skill level and sometimes how good a players gear is. When players have to communicate with one another and adapt to certain situations based on the limitations of their group, effective group problem solving and critical thinking is taking place. This can be exemplified even further if we take into consideration that the group is not performing very well (struggling through boss fights, group members dying consistently, and so forth). An assessment of the situation will have to be made and proper strategizing will have to take place in order to correct the problems.

When it was first released *Azjol-Nerub* was arguably one of the harder, if not hardest, instances for a random group to complete. The mechanics of the last boss, *Anub'arak*, made it difficult for random groups to coordinate effectively in their first attempt at defeating the boss. One skill in particular that the *Anub'arak* uses is called Pound. This ability would essentially kill any player who was not the tank in one hit. In order to dodge the ability, players had to use timing and positioning in order to not get hit by the skill. Usually, the first encounter with this skill would kill everyone in the group due to inexperience and understanding. Upon failure, the group would discuss possible solutions, think about the situation, and then come up with another plan. This

process would usually repeat itself until the group defeated the boss or decided they were incapable of handling this encounter. Regardless of the outcome, our fictional group had to employ collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving skills in order to progress or disband. Even if the group did not defeat *Anub'arak* and reap the benefits of the items he could possibly drop, the group members all leave the instance with a richer understanding of the instance and how to problem solve with a group.

When a group fails a task players tend to put the blame on anything but themselves, and usually do not realize any possible benefit they may have gained from failure. Individual skill certainly plays a role in a group's success when it comes to online games, but in group situations it is not everything. A well-coordinated group with solid communication can usually tackle a task much easier than a group who is relying on one person to do all of the work. By understanding the stages of group development, it can help players become better group members when moving forth in their online adventures.

While continuing research in group dynamics of online games, the idea of shared knowledge appears repeatedly. Further research into the concept of shared knowledge (how it comes about, why it is accepted, and where it can be found) is an avenue for further research. Random ad hoc groups seem to rely heavily on shared knowledge; therefore, a better understanding of the concept will lead to better group experiences. Deeper evaluation of leadership styles in online games brings forth research possibilities in how players establish credibility and earn respect in virtual worlds. There is an air of always wanting to be on top in online games – being in the best guild, having the most progressed character, and having hard to obtain items. These three factors can play a role in the amount of power a person has in online groups. The assumption of leadership qualities in those with lots of virtual "stuff" can have detrimental effects on a group's productivity. This is due to the ability of players to pay for (with ingame currency or real life currency) items, thus eliminating the

need for grouping and learning how to complete dungeons. The fundamental aspect of these types of games is to complete tasks in order to earn items, it would be interesting to shed light on why some members of the gaming community choose to pay for these items rather than earn them.

Group dynamics are a field that has been long studied, whether to increase productivity or just to better understand the type of communication occurs. In research conducted by IBM, it was found those workers who played MMORPGs had better team work and leadership skills than those who did not (Edery, 2008). Venture capitalists have also discussed using *WoW* as a platform for innovation and team building skills (Stewart, 2006). With businesses considering online games in this manner, further research in to their effectiveness is necessary. *World of Warcraft* is a fantastic platform to study how ad hoc groups work and the players communicate. People who normally would never work together in any other situation join groups to complete common goals. Regardless of the outcome, it is hard to find another platform with the staying power, popularity, and the ability for this type of communication to occur.

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