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Virtual Sense of Community in a World of Warcraft® Storytelling Open Forum Thread

Dean Anthony Fabi Gui
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract

World of Warcraft® (WoW), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) extends to its members a virtual landscape of live gaming opportunities through such platforms as “dice” rolled character stats, open-ended story development, and interactive AI. These affordances are underpinned by a kind of virtual sense of community bringing players together to develop relationships and the self, adventure together, build up wealth, and overcome obstacles in order to complete quests. In addition to live game-play (or “in-world”) communities, WoW residents create alternative communities through rich online forums—here, new members are recruited into guilds, disputes are spawned and slayed, and seasoned warriors reminisce over worlds and lives that once were. However, a third type of community is also evident through particular threads crafted within forums specifically for collaborative storytelling (or roleplaying). This paper examines sense of community—a sense of “belonging to, importance of, and identification with a community”—through one particular thread, “The Darkening Grove Tavern” under the forum *World’s End Tavern* using an adaptation of McMillan and Chavis’ theory and Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor’s ethnographic data collection methodology for qualitative analysis of virtual worlds. Findings from players’ story text (or “turns”) suggest that online storytelling forum threads exhibit a linguistically and semiotically branded sense of virtual community.

1. Introduction

Storytelling has existed for centuries with its messages open to a diverse range of interpretations (Wang, Li, Zhang & Dai, 2008). Stories, then, are the smallest unit by which human beings communicate their experience and knowledge of the world. Specifically, within the social professions, storytelling can promote interaction amongst professionals, reducing feelings of isolation and encouraging feelings of empathy and compassion (Haigh & Hardy, 2011). Additionally, in an educational context, the rapid advancement of computer technology offers effective and creative learning and sharing environments to both contemporary and traditional cultures (Wang, Li, Zhang & Dai, 2008). Community research has thus developed from studying offline settings, in which people interact with each other in face-to-face situations, to a virtual arena, where people communicate through information and communication technologies. Both offline and online communities have a range of characteristics in common, such as a common aim, shared identity, common belongings, or shared interests (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher & Sonn, 2007).

Consequently, community life is determined by social interaction, interdependence, geographical area, and common ties (Pozzi, Marta, Marzana, Gozzoli & Ruggieri, 2014; and Jason, Stevens & Ram, 2015). This sense of community (SOC) consists of four inter-related elements (McMillan & Chavis, 1986):

- I. Membership – self-reinforcing aspects boundaries, emotional safety, personal investment, sense of belonging, identification with other group members, and a common symbol system;
- II. Influence – members’ perception of impact on the community (attractiveness), and the amount of influence the community has over the individual member (cohesiveness and conformity);
- III. Integration and fulfillment of needs – rewards, benefits, and reinforcement are necessary parts of being a member of a community and to maintain a positive sense of togetherness; the needs of community members can be fulfilled through the status of membership, the success of the community, and perceived competence of other members;
- IV. Shared emotional connection – a shared community history, shared events, positive interaction, and identification with the community; the more people interact, the more likely they form close relationships and stronger bonds.

What has developed from this are storytelling communities in diverse forms and serving various functions. Yet, while the concept of sense of community has also been applied to virtual communities and online storytelling communities in order to explain membership in this particular environment, virtual communities encounter different limitations such as synchronousness, physical proximity, spatial cohesiveness needed for face-to-face interaction, anonymity (by means of nicknames or avatars), and possibly encroaching on individual boundaries if social courtesies are ignored. Hence, the validity of online communities, in general, tends to be questioned (Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman & Mai, 2016), and traditional sense of community measures may not be easily applied to virtual settings (Abfalter, Zaglia & Mueller, 2012).

World of Warcraft® (WoW) is a unique online storytelling community in that not only does it afford live, massively multiplayer, virtual gaming, and face-to-face interaction (Crenshaw, LaMorte & Nardi, 2017), but it also boasts a robust online forum community consisting of general, guild, technical, game world, special interest, and storytelling threads (Poor, 2014; and Brown, 2017), amongst many others. It is a subscription-based, multilingual, massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) which was launched in 2004 (Wright, 2004; and McMillan, 1996) by Blizzard Entertainment, and – at the time of this writing – with over 4,000,000 players (Brown, 2017). Part of a player’s worth and ability to move forward in the game depends on the joining of a guild (Mancini, Caricati, Balestrieri & Sibilla, 2018) – in other words, the willingness of a player to

become part of a social community (Hsiao & Chiou, 2012). Specifically, as a virtual community premised on social elements (Pozzi, Marta, Marzana, Gozzoli & Ruggieri, 2014), WoW potentially offers untapped areas for discovery, especially from a sense of community perspective. The Community Forums is one such area: part of the WoW realm, yet also removed from the main in-world gaming platform, in an area where stories unfold in a text-based environment, and where it is possible to be a WoW player, without having to also be a guild member (Pozzi, Marta, Marzana, Gozzoli & Ruggieri, 2014), or just to simply be an observer.

Even though WoW, as both a storytelling and community-oriented virtual environment, has served as the foundation of rigorous research, its web-based forums as rich, storytelling, community-conscious spaces have received little (if any) scholarly attention. This exploratory paper examines psychological sense of community (PSOC) – or sense of community: a sense of “belonging to, importance of, and identification with a community” (Brodsky & Marx, 2001) – through one particular Open Tavern RP (self-driven) thread in the WoW community website: “The Darkening Grove Tavern” under the forum *World’s End Tavern* using an adaptation of McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) theory and Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor’s (2012) ethnographic data collection methodology for qualitative analysis of virtual worlds. The intention behind this research is 1) to delineate the kind of storytelling community created in the Inn in the middle of Felwood, and 2) to determine whether or not the indication of a “neutral” setting in a text-based environment really obliged the community members to behave accordingly. A literature review commences, followed by methodology, findings and discussion, and finally a conclusion where implications for real world applications regarding interaction amongst multicultural communities will also be considered. It is not the intention of this present study to comment on the current state of WoW (Brown, 2017; and Crenshaw, LaMorte & Nardi, 2017), but rather to reinvigorate a storytelling forum thread that inhabits the diverse characteristic senses of an online community, which – if nurtured and cultivated properly – could yield opportunities for further research and offer a “fuller understanding of the variety of communities in our society” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 19).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ecology of Storytelling Forums

Stories and storytelling communities have perpetually morphed and canvassed global landscapes. In Cameron’s (2012) study, the concept of “story” has evolved to take on new meaning (weavings of personal experiences and the wider world), new forms (discourse, narrative, hybrid), and adopted by theorists and practitioners across a diverse range of geographic contexts (p. 575). This storytelling ecology is echoed in Pretty, Bishop, Fisher & Sonn (2007), whereby social and geographic locale both serve to influence affect, cognition, and behavior of those inhabiting community environments. Furthermore, the art of storytelling is an opportunity for exploration, and development of the imagination and problem-solving abilities. Mokhtar, Halim, & Kamarulzaman’s (2011) study considers how university students engage with challenging stories as a means for the empowerment of new and inventive ideas, to enhance communication skills, to identify important ideas and details, and to improve comprehension. In this study, storytelling is developed by WoW players who generate text-based collaborative stories in the community website forum by merging together experience from live game playing, personal linguistic tokens (such as acknowledgement of extended absences and retiring for the evening), as well as authority as writers in a creative and collaborative environment.

An important change in current game storytelling, according to Lebowitz & Klug (2011), is the ongoing effort to integrate the story more tightly with game elements (such as gameplay, graphics, and music). Game developers are realizing both the importance of bringing writers in during the initial planning and development stages, and that games are a strong storytelling medium.

Furthermore, digital domains cultivate collaborative partnerships in ethnographic explorations, storytelling environment designs, and intercultural simulations across geographical spaces (Churchill, Snowdon, & Munro, 2012). This paradigm shift is evident in the practice of audio storytelling through podcasting, as noted in McHugh (2016); and virtual learning environments transformed through digital storytelling as mediators of learner-driven knowledge and networking, suggested by Niemi, Harju, Vivitsou, Viitanen, Multisilta, & Kuokkanen (2014). While this present study focuses on elements which make up a text-based storytelling community in an MMORPG and how the interaction between characters in a collaborative story might have implications for physical world communities, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the potential significance of storytelling in an educational context. This significance is mentioned in the concluding remarks.

In their seminal study, McMillan & Chavis (1986) propose four examples of communities to illustrate how members make sense of the groups they belong to: I) The University – through a series of linear media communications, individuals satisfy their own needs through the integration of other individuals' needs; II) The Neighborhood – community organizers identify common concerns, channeling members' local involvement; III) The Youth Gang – shared values and influence over the environment allow individual needs to be met; and IV) The Kibbutz – idealism and immigration pave the way for new identities founded upon humanism and faith. These groups serve as foundations for storytelling communities committed to natural disasters (Goldstein, Wessells, Lejano, & Butler, 2015), news media (Scolari, 2013), indigenous populations (Kral, 2014), and cultural dissemination (Christopoulos, Mavridis, Andreadis, & Karigiannis, 2013). In this study, online storytelling thread members are part of an ecology (Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015) that both destabilizes their social cohesion while emphasizing their identity cohesion (Blommaert, 2017).

2.2. Communities in World of Warcraft®

People thrive not in one community, but in a series of nested communities – a “hierarchy of symbolic communities.” Brodsky & Marx (2001) examine low income women from a community center in Baltimore, Maryland (USA), noting that the center behaves as a nexus: the center itself acting as a macro-community negotiating the shared values, emotional connection, and appreciation of differences between the various micro-communities (the women and staff of the center). Similarly, even though beyond the scope of this study, there are distinct affordances which make up the live gaming macro community, and its multifarious portal, intersecting and nested web-based micro-communities. Perhaps more distinctive than and also more intricately embedded in the WoW community website forum, storytelling forums are micro-communities heavily influenced by the live gaming world, the general community website, dictates of a writing community, and external forces of the players' own lives.

In a virtual community, sense of belonging refers to the feeling of belonging, membership, or identification to the virtual community. Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau & Zhang (2012) observe that through this sense of belonging and internalization of social norms, members not only care about one another but are also willing to participate in activities associated with the community via actions such as taking knowledge or information from there back to the physical world. In several instances of the examples from this study's Findings and Discussion, WoW players participate with the storytelling community through out-of-character comments and direct and indirect reminders to each other (through storytelling dialogue) about the “neutral” nature of the tavern setting. However, virtual gaming environments seem to have also inadvertently conceived communities steeped in damaging and destructive inclinations (Brown, 2017), and WoW's complicated virtual gaming community has pushed players to communicate outside of the game, through game-related blogs, forums and websites (Brown, 2017).

While certain player motivations are associated with teamwork, competition to engage with MMORPGs (Billieux et al., 2013), and escapism (Oggins & Sammis, 2012); and certain WoW communities combine both the affordances of technology and the influence of culture (Crenshaw, LaMorte & Nardi, 2017), recent research leans towards conclusions that World of Warcraft, in particular, has produced communities that are essentially neoliberal (Crenshaw, LaMorte & Nardi, 2017), victim-playing (Blommaert, 2017), and discriminatory (Mancini, Caricati, Balestrieri & Sibilla, 2018). Nevertheless, in Thorne, Fischer & Lu (2012), WoW serves as a “semiotic ecology” of game-generated text, player-to-player communication and collaboration (p. 279). Here, the “quest text” (p. 281) of the in-game virtual environment generates linguistic complexity and player suitability, similar to this study’s online, text-based storytelling forum thread.

2.3. Sense of Community in MMORPGs

Online environments can also function as wider support mechanisms for individuals, and thus sense of community, social support, and social identities can work in tandem within these online contexts (O'Connor, Longman, White & Obst, 2015). Sense of community, in Pretty, Bishop, Fisher & Sonn (2007), manifests with members of multifarious communities and within the multiple layers of those communities, including virtual communities. Hsiao & Chiou (2012) observe that while a player may join a specific guild, it is also possible to form “social knots” – to join other guilds and players indefinitely to add to game experience (such as quests, social mobility, and attainment of levels, skills, power and wealth). Subsequently, intra- and extra-guild ties represent two important areas of a player’s life in an MMORPG. These relationships are also evident in the “The Darkening Grove Tavern” thread: characters from different backgrounds, races, classes and guilds (Alliance and Horde) gather at the inn – some to pursue personal agendas, some to share stories, and others to form more permanent alliances across guilds. While not part of the data examined, the point regarding permanent alliances is of note as several characters seem interested in forming bonds across the two main factions (Alliance and Horde), more enduring in nature than Hsiao & Chiou’s proposed “social knots.”

The advances in internet technology have enabled people to communicate without the constraints of physical space and time; users of MMORPGs, therefore, can choose the spaces they wish to role-play in, generate activities or events as needed, and form a story in which they emerge as the main gaming characters, as noted by Park & Chung (2011). Characteristics of members in these communities are dichotomous – they are both addicted to problematic gameplay and experience sense of community (Sublette & Mullan, 2012), with the gamescape itself supporting both collaboration and competition (Romero, Usart, Ott, Earp & de Freitas, 2012). Players studied in this present research create their own text-based storytelling community, building upon each other’s threads; interestingly, however, these players also seem psychologically bound by the concept behind the story: “This is a neutral in[n] located in Felwood, so all are welcome to join in.” It is understood that the inn (tavern) is neutral ground, a place for building relationships and conversing; violence is kept to the realm of thoughts, and characters who do witness fighting outside of the inn either avoid it or attempt to disband it.

As already suggested in the literature, negative characteristics are being attributed to MMOG and MMORPG communities, with certain hostile behaviors viewed as native to the environments – “griefing” and cyberbullying, for example (Mancini, Caricati, Balestrieri & Sibilla, 2018). Yet some groups, nevertheless, engage in healthy relationships with virtual communities. Australian WoW players, as suggested by O'Connor, Longman, White & Obst (2015), identify with a MMOG-based sense of community, forming gaming communities that support fellow players socially and emotionally. Subsequently, members of live video gaming streams, such as Twitch, form what Hamilton, Garretson & Kerne (2014) describe as “participatory communities” (p. 1). These online

communities, thus, together with the storytelling community in “The Darkening Grove Tavern” mediate, socialize and interact in “virtual third places” (p. 4).

3. Methodology

3.1. Background

The collaborative story examined for this study was extracted from a World of Warcraft® Community Forum (called World’s End Tavern: Role-play and Fan Fiction) in the online community website. The Open Tavern RP thread title is “The Darkening Grove Tavern” (<https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/3530335203?page=10>) and is part of numerous other threads (such as guild membership recruitment and dispute settlement) embedded within this particular Forum. It was chosen because of a robust and active storytelling community through healthy dialogue, an active storyline, and inclusive membership. Additionally, story elements, such as Felwood where the inn is located (and which serves as the setting for roleplay) are taken from existing in-game regions. The story was created on 6 November, 2011, and had accumulated 190 entries from 23 players, with the last entry occurring on 22 December, 2011 – indicating a possible termination to the text-based roleplaying. The text was extracted in March, 2015, and analysed in March, 2018. One community member deleted his/her comment, and therefore no identifying information was provided (other than the avatar’s name). To ensure privacy, avatar names were removed from discussion.

3.2. Procedure

Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor’s (2012) ethnographic data collection methodology for qualitative analysis of virtual worlds was consulted when accessing, saving and examining the story thread. The Chatlog methodology was adapted for this purpose. A qualitative approach was then taken using McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) four elements of sense of community – membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection: story tokens which manifested the processes from the four elements were extracted for analysis. This approach was taken to add to the growing body of qualitative work conducted on MMOGs (O’Connor, Longman, White & Obst, 2015).

3.3. Analysis

Extracted story tokens were examined and analyzed with respect to their reflection of each of the four senses of community elements. Subsequently, the author proposes 1) to define the storytelling community created within the tavern in the middle of Felwood, and 2) to determine the extent to which a “neutral” setting in a text-based environment influenced the community members to behave accordingly. None of the sense of community indexes or scales (Jason, Stevens & Ram, 2015) were used because this study does not involve forum member interviewing, but rather attempts to determine virtual sense of community through language tokens and semiotics, while taking into consideration that the online forum is part of an MMORPG that is a unique form of online community (O’Connor, Longman, White & Obst, 2015). The author also has previous, albeit brief, experience playing WoW.

4. Findings and Discussion

The following analysis borrows from McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) four elements of sense of community as an a priori structure (O’Connor, Longman, White & Obst, 2015) for how WoW players identify with community in a text-based, storytelling environment. However, before moving

to the discussion of the analyzed text, a legend and character lore are offered to explain the general storytelling landscape and gaming language:

***	Masked identifying info
CAPS	Shouting
(()) or ()	Whispering / Out-of-character comment

Figure 1: Legend

The following is the extracted and analyzed story text. At the end of each analysis, a related table aligns text sets with the respective element’s processes. At the start of the backstory, the Thread Master notes: *“This is a neutral in located in Felwood, so all are welcome to join in.”* She then begins the rp’ing with background story, moving her character towards and finally positioned in Felwood and at the inn. Language has not been modified, edited or corrected.



Figure 2: Player character lore

4.1. Membership

Turn 8: *** walked in the Tavern... AND ALL OF A SUDDEN HE PULLS OUT HIS RIFLE AND *BOOM* BOOM* BOOM* HE SHOOTS EVERYONE IN THE TAVERN. *** leaves content.

This is the only instance where a player seems to reject all characteristics delineating membership (and community). This particular player enters the story only once in order to disrupt the psychological rules of engagement within the neutral setting of the text-based story – a task which would not have been so easily executed in the live gaming world – and inadvertently establishes the storytelling boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Turn 9: ((..... Trollers gonna troll.....))

Turn 9 is the only direct reaction to the interruption in storytelling in turn 8, in the form of an out-of-character response noting that it is the nature of someone disruptive – a troll – to bring negativity to the community (Brown, 2017), highlighting players who belong and players who do not (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This response emphasizes a supportive forum roleplaying community (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher & Sonn, 2007) and also acts as an indirect reinforcement of community boundaries.

Turn 45: “... I just can’t pass up an opportunity to kill someone.”

Turn 56: As he walked out of the fiery portal he noticed what seemed to be a human and a blood elf in battle. He pondered as to who he should help, he disliked both Humans and Blood Elfs, such materialistic races. He decided not to worry about it and walked into the inn to rest and get a drink.

While many of the characters think of killing one another or foreshadow some kind of impending doom by external forces, no characters realize those thoughts – not even the human and blood elf who end up fighting outside of the inn. This could be a manifestation of self-preservation and even preservation of the other (Whitty, Young & Goodings, 2011), reinforcing emotional and physical safety, and investment in the roleplaying landscape (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Is there a sense that if a character is killed in the story that somehow this will affect the in-gaming world? Even though during live gaming there is the possibility of resurrection, that option is not exercised in the text-based world.

Turn 159: A tall, well gromed man steps silently into the tavern. A heavy cloak around his shoulders, a dark cowl hiding his features. As he enters, the light catches his eyes. One blue and one gold. He glances around slowly and walks towards the bar.

Turn 160: Taking a seat at the bar, *** took a quick glance at the hulk of metal that walked in earlier. Glowing Blue Eyes? Death Knight then. Unnatural beings, at least with the regular zombies you knew where they stood. He also noticed another human walk in. A cursory observation showed nothing special until the light caught his eyes. Hmm never seen eyes like that before.

Turns 159 and 160 demonstrate the boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) arranged within the inn taking effect: Horde and Alliance members suspend existing in-game faction rivalries, exercising instead their right to membership in the “Darkening Grove Tavern” community. In this case, characters’ eye color seems to serve as the requisite for membership – the player at Turn 159 describing his character with “[o]ne blue and one gold” eye; and the character at Turn 160 remarking (through internal dialogue) at the eye colors, and also at the “[g]lowing [b]lue [e]yes” of another character.

Table 1: Membership processes and aligned storytelling thread turns

Membership processes	Turn
1. Emotional safety may be considered as part of the broader notion of security.	9, 56
2. The sense of belonging and identification involves the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there.	8, 9, 45, 159, 160
3. Personal investment is an important contributor to a person’s feeling of group membership and to his or her sense of community.	9
4. A common symbol system serves several important functions in creating and maintaining sense of community, one of which is to maintain group boundaries.	9

4.2. Influence

Turn 73: “Lad, remember we be aiming to put a stop ta’ that fight, not ta’ further it.”

Turn 80: *** looked down briefly and noticed that the blood elf had gone unconscious, better than dead and that had been what he wanted to prevent.

In the preceding turns, several players have already come into contact with the two fighters outside of the inn; and their actions not only have an impact on the community but also reflect the influence which the unspoken code of conduct has over this community – the neutrality of the story setting. The influence that each player has over other players – to either avoid fighting, as an example of influence over group actions (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) or to roleplay authentically and characteristically enough to conclude a fight scenario, as illustrative of cohesiveness through influence over members’ actions (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) – reinforces the dedication players have to each other and their community, which might otherwise have become “delicate and fragile” (Blommaert, 2017, p. 5).

Turn 190: *** feels a light bonk on his head and turns to see a dwarf there. He reaches for his axe but slides it away and pulls of his helm revealing his dimly glowing eyes. He returns the bonk with a friendly punch to the shoulder and calls the barmaid over and orders some more mead and quail.

Influence is bidirectional (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and this is evinced in the descriptive expression the player at Turn 190 uses in reaction to a dwarf’s “light bonk” by responding in kind with a “friendly punch”. It is interesting to speculate how these polite adjectives might lessen the intensity of the intended assault (a bonk is a bonk, and a punch is a punch, after all) or unfold in-game; yet, nevertheless, the players have sufficient influence over each other’s characters, as well as self-directed influence over the NPC and immediate storyline environment (“calls the barmaid” and orders a meal), to keep the peace at the inn.

Table 2: Influence processes and aligned storytelling thread turns

Influence processes	Turn
1. Members are more attracted to a community in which they feel that they are influential.	73
2. There is a significant positive relationship between cohesiveness and a community’s influence on its members to conform. Thus, both conformity and community influence on members indicate the strength of the bond.	80
3. The pressure for conformity and uniformity comes from the needs of the individual and the community for consensual validation. Thus, conformity serves as a force for closeness as well as an indicator of cohesiveness.	73, 80
4. Influence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member operate concurrently, and one might expect to see the force of both operating simultaneously in a tightly knit community.	73, 80, 190

4.3. Integration and fulfillment of needs

Turn 4: *** got an itching sensation to reach for *** and cut down everything in the room, but he suppressed it. His inner darkness seethed and roiled inside its prison, but *** wasn't going to let it out. This was not the place to do that...

The player in this turn (the same human who ends up fighting with the blood elf outside) is possibly reinforcing the idea that the inn is a neutral location and therefore refraining from any acts of violence. In several instances, players use similar terms like "(t)his was not the place to do that" to either directly or indirectly remind other players and themselves of what behaviors should or should not be conducted within the storytelling community.

Turn 14: ((I'm bored and need something to add to my backstory so could I be someone hunting you down to kill you ***?))

Status of membership and perceived competence of other members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) could be evident in this example. An out-of-character comment is made from one player (who is of a lower level) to another player (who is of a higher level, seems to have a reputation amongst some other players, and is perceived to be someone to be reckoned with) – a request for permission to hunt another player – perhaps a consideration that might not have been made for another character or even during live gaming. The communities formed are empowering individuals and players to become part of something exciting while making friends with like-minded individuals (Brown, 2017). The collaboration in story development may work as a deterrent against violent behavior and as an enactment of self-preservation; encouraging the idea that within the confines of a building structure (in this case the inn) is “neutral territory,” a safe space (Brodsky & Marx, 2001) or even a “gated community” (Zhang & Lin, 2012) for players to build up a community.

Turn 154: *** grinned at the question, but even better, she just found an opportunity to make a few gold as well, enough to get her own room without having to ASK for gold or, though the thought was enticing, it was also humiliating... asking to share a room with someone.

...

...

"You see, I have what's left of these fine enchanted bandages. Enhances healing, cleans the wound, closes the wound for healing at an remarkable speed. Of course, I had to buy the full roll for twenty gold, magical deal I say. What's left of it I can sell for let's say... twenty silver?"

By exercising both descriptive storytelling and speech, competence as reinforcer is mediated through an opportunity to make some quick money. The character engages with explanatory language and all CAPS, that while “ASKING” for gold would be humiliating, the storytelling landscape and its community afford the opportunity to barter enchanted bandages for silver coins (although there is the added insinuation that community members could also give money to the character.) The in-game MMORPG presents affordances so that magical items, currency and independent negotiating can further be transported to the text-based forum world for richer gameplay, story progress and the player's ability to help her character become more complex and fully realized.

Turn 179: (Sorry for not posting, I was quite busy lately.)

The player's storyline and the three turns that follow are mostly descriptive, containing little in the way of dialogue or interaction. Even though this is not the only instance of an out-of-character

(OOC) remark (or, more specifically, apology), and membership is not estranged by individuals dipping in and out of the community, as the Thread Master, the combination of the OOC apology, continued descriptive language, and lack of individual-group interaction (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) / roleplaying seem to act as a catalyst that destabilizes the storytelling community (as is suggested in Turn 189).

Turn 189: ((Who ever nerco'd this thread.....i hate u. Let it fade and be so, no reason to necro))

The Thread Master began posting descriptive storylines and lessening interaction over 11 and 12 November, 2011, with her Turn being the very last posted on the 12th. On 19 December (over one month after the last Turn), a new player joins the community and attempts to revive – “necro” – the thread, leading to the lament of the player at Turn 189. Competence is a reinforcer – people gravitate towards people and groups that offer the most rewards (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is unclear if a perceived lessening of competence removed the reinforcer essential to the continued pull of forum role-players towards the online storytelling community; however, even the frustrated remark in Turn 189 betrays the loyalty of a member whose sense of community for the “Darkening Grove Tavern” demands that the community’s expiration “fade” with integrity, and not needlessly desecrated and brought back from the dead.

Table 3: Integration and fulfillment of needs processes and aligned storytelling thread turns

Integration and fulfillment of needs processes	Turn
1. Reinforcement and need fulfillment is a primary function of a strong community.	14, 154, 189
2. Some of the rewards that are effective reinforcers of communities are status of membership, success of the community, and competence or capabilities of other members.	4, 154
3. There are many other undocumented needs that communities fill, but individual values are the source of these needs. The extent to which individual values are shared among community members will determine the ability of a community to organize and prioritize its need-fulfillment activities.	14
4. A strong community is able to fit people together so that people meet others’ needs while they meet their own.	4, 14, 154, 179

4.4. Shared emotional connection

Turn 147: (Now ***, I have seen this many times. Before you attempt to set blaze to the tavern, perhaps you should gain the Thread Creator’s permission first, maybe having her inn burned down wasn’t part of the rp she wanted. It’s polite. And I might sound like I’m nagging on you, but I’m not really, so don’t take it personally >.<)

Turn 158: (trust me i wont be burning it down lol, if theres a fight im moving it elsewhere)

These two extracts are examples of tightly woven communication and community (Poor, 2014) whereby the player’s sense of community is influenced by identification with a shared history (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); the individual (the Thread Master’s perceived intended role playing);

the community (preservation of the tavern); through the use of tentative language and emoticons; and placing an emphasis on collectivist values and interdependent social relationships more in line with East Asian cultures (Zhang & Lin, 2012). This is a potentially interesting observation since “The Darkening Grove Tavern” thread can only be found under the American and United States (US) English language version of the Southeast Asia sites.

Turn 172: *** sighed deeply, for a middle of nowhere inn, this place was quite popular it seemed. She had at first, began to question the owner of the establishment's intelligence... but didn't complain. Now she realized that this was some sort of hidden genius of his for it seemed this place was quite popular.

((oh whoa, it's a guy from ***. WASSSSUUUUUUPPPPP!))

Turn 173: His odd eyes flashing, he looks around the tavern, his ale resting on the table. He mutters something under his breath.

((Ello Ello!! Would I knows you?))

Turn 174: ((Nope! not at all, but I love your guild XD and your guild leader is a good friend of mine. ENOUGH OOC OUT OF ME THOUGH!))

Turn 175: ((well thanks. I love it. And I dont bite.....much so feel free to approach. =)))

During Turns 172-175, the shared event (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) is not the story, but OOC remarks on one player’s familiarity with the guild and guild leader of the other player, and (to an extent) the other player’s invitation to continue social interaction possibly in-game as well (“so feel free to ap[p]roach”). Additionally, several interesting linguistic and semiotic choices are made to convey this connection:

Turn 172: WASSSSUUUUUUPPPPP! – The use of all caps, letter repetition, exclamation mark, generational form of salutation.

Turn 173: Ello Ello!! Would I knows you? – The dialectical spelling is inconsistent with the in-character descriptive language, and could serve as comedic effect.

Turn 174: XD – The loud laughter emoticon; ENOUGH OOC OUT OF ME THOUGH! – The use of all caps and an exclamation mark; this time, seemingly as a loud reminder of possible overuse of the OOC exchange.

Turn 175: =) – The original smiley face emoticon.

The almost manic sentimentality of the dialogue in this indirectly shared history exudes from the language illustrations just examined: the use of all caps, exclamations marks, colloquialisms, and emoticons quite clearly point to a communication that intends to be loud, rambunctious, familiar, and pressing... and makes a poignant case for the shared emotional connections amongst members of virtual and online communities.

Table 4: Shared emotional connection processes and aligned storytelling thread turns

Shared emotional connection processes	Turn
1. Contact hypothesis: The more people interact, the more likely they are to become close.	172, 173, 174, 175
2. Quality of interaction: The more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond.	147

Shared emotional connection processes	Turn
3. Closure to events: If the interaction is ambiguous and the community's tasks are left unresolved, group cohesiveness will be inhibited.	174
4. Shared valent event hypothesis: The more important the shared event is to those involved, the greater the community bond.	172, 173, 174, 175
5. Investment: This feature contributes more than just boundary maintenance and cognitive dissonance. Investment determines the importance to the member of the community's history and current status	147
6. Effect of honor and humiliation on community members: Reward or humiliation in the presence of community has a significant impact on attractiveness (or adverseness) of the community to the person	147
7. Spiritual bond: Often the spiritual connection of the community experience is the primary purpose of religious and quasi-religious communities and cults.	174

5. Conclusion

This study examined the World of Warcraft® Open Forum RP thread, “The Darkening Grove Tavern,” a text-based collaborative storytelling community, and considered how language used in the story thread would 1) demonstrate how the “Darkening Grove Tavern” open forum thread functions as an online storytelling community, and 2) to determine whether or not the indication of a “neutral” setting in a text-based MMOG environment influences its community members to behave accordingly. Using a qualitative methodological approach, the four elements belonging to sense of community, and ethnographic data collection for virtual worlds were applied to extracted player turns/text. Results indicated that the storytelling community i) exhibited all four components of a (virtual) sense of community (membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection), and ii) maintained a strong leaning towards role-playing within the constructs of a neutral, structural online location. These findings are in line with the objectives intended for this research.

While exploratory in nature, there are several areas for potential future research which were outside of the scope of this study:

- From an educational perspective, how game-related collaborative stories can be seen as authentic texts and how these can be used in both language- and literature-based English courses (Zheng, Young, Wagner & Brewer, 2009).
- The reasons for the existence of a text-based story forum thread on the WoW community website, when there is a healthy storytelling community in the live gaming world (Steinkuehler, 2007).
- Any innovative changes in language semantics or neologisms in a text-based WoW community which may differ or even resemble those already discovered in current research on in-game WoW language features (Collister, 2012).
- Whether or not social bonding in text-based forums would have an impact on live gaming interactions, and potentially transferable and non-transferable gaming elements between live gaming, online text-based communities, and even a player's physical environment (Lofgren & Fefferman, 2007).

- Developing a virtual sense of community scale or index (Blanchard, 2008) with additional measures for respective online forum and convention communities.

Part of the difficulty with conducting this study was mentioned in the Findings and Discussion section: in order to approach the issue from an Asian context, the ability to read Korean or Chinese is necessary. Different international sites have different content, especially in the Forum sections. While the Southeast Asia English site alleviated some of these concerns, it is uncertain how much of the harvested data is authentic in nature in that regard, especially since the Southeast Asian region is not an option for account creation in the virtual gaming world. Several other works also report on complications with server regions (Crenshaw, LaMorte & Nardi, 2017) or study participation selection restricted to server location (Mancini, Caricati, Balestrieri & Sibilla, 2018).

Adaptable and predatory, humankind has colonized social media and has adapted communities to thrive in both online and physical environments, as observed by Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman & Mai (2016). In spite of this, much of the reviewed literature on in-game WoW depict the platform as complicated, abusive, neoliberal and detrimental. Game designers, educators, creative writers and ethnographers could consider addressing these areas of need within the context of online storytelling/roleplaying forum communities. For instance, creative writers and ethnographers might investigate into why MMOG-based storytelling/roleplaying forum threads might not be enjoying a longer shelf-life. O'Connor, Longman, White & Obst (2015), furthermore, classify MMOGs as online interest-based communities with distinctive membership; however, for educator-researchers drawn to games like WoW, maintaining paid subscriptions can prove challenging, and without active WoW accounts, even participation in online forums is essentially unachievable. Subsequently, WoW designers and engineers have an opportunity to enrich the online platform and forum experiences for an even greater range of users. With such a variety of virtual environments accessible these days, each unique, according to Mancini, Caricati, Balestrieri & Sibilla (2018), in organization, sociality, and customization, the online storytelling forum may eventually reemerge as a place for massively multiplayer online role playing, but especially also for a wider and more diversified array of individuals and communities.

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