Understanding the Dynamics of Internet Gamer Communication

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Millions of people worldwide subscribe to play games online; I am one of them. I currently subscribe to one game, Blizzard Entertainment’s World of Warcraft (WoW). In the game, players from all over the world have the ability to interact with others in a variety of ways; they can fight other players, they can band together to defeat dungeon bosses, or they can simply socialize in different locations. While players have the option of going solo at any point in the game, one of the key elements to World of Warcraft’s appeal is its socializing factors; it is one of the key reasons I play. I have been playing WoW for five years now, and in that time I’ve formed numerous personal relationships, some more intimate than others. Before I played WoW, I socialized in chat rooms and other online games; I still remain close friends with some of those people.

Discussing online relationships with people seems to bring out two general categories of thought: online relationships aren’t as meaningful as real life, face to face relationships, or they can be as meaningful, if not more so, than those in real life. A classmate of mine asked: if online relationships can be just as meaningful, then why do businesses spend thousands of dollars to send their employees to meetings? My reply was that it really only applies in the domain of interpersonal relationships; to this, he could see how that may indeed be true. Another friend of mine, whom I met online, used to scoff at the idea of meaningful online relationships; then he met me, and he met others who played WoW with him, and his mind was changed because of the
intimacy in those relationships. I have another classmate who plays WoW; we’ll sit and share stories about our various exploits with our guilds or other players with each other, and we talk about them with the understanding that these are real relationships with different levels of meaning for both of us. Looking at these situations, and looking back at my own experiences, I am a firm believer that online relationships can be just as meaningful, if not more so, than those in real life. I’ve always wondered what research had to say about why this is so.

Critics of online relationships have often said that the facelessness online leaves out vital nonverbal cues, while others would disagree, citing that online relationships rely on different cues to increase intimacy. I can see valid arguments from both, but I still hold to my original position, and my personal experiences can support this. Looking at my personal experiences, I wonder if online relationships have grown in their abilities to rival or surpass face to face ones; how has technology affected online relationships? And what about when people blend the two environments, online and face to face, together?

Answers for these questions can be found through various research, the applications of theories, and real life experiences. While there is a vast amount of knowledge that explores answers to my questions, I seek to answer them in regards to those of Internet gamers, specifically players of WoW. Some of the theories that can be applied to Internet gamer communication are Social Information Processing Theory, Social Penetration Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory, and Speech Codes Theory.

The basic tenet of Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) is that relationships built through computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be as fulfilling as face-to-face (FTF) communication because those involved “can adapt to this restricted medium and use it effectively to develop close relationships” (Griffin, 2009, p. 139). Key adaptations occur in the
importance of time and the importance of verbal content to make up for the lack of nonverbal cues (Griffin, 2009). Research that I have found, as well as personal experience, supports SIPT by exploring different aspects of relationships through different theories.

Just as FTF relationships are formed based on initial interaction and reducing uncertainty, CMC relationships go through a similar pattern (Ramirez, J., 2007). In addition, pursued relationship development can be affected by the presence of anticipation of future interaction based on the initial impression formed (Ramirez, J., 2007). If initial interaction between people is negative, then they are less likely to anticipate interacting with each other again; examples of this can be found both online and offline. Personally, if I enter a classroom where a classmate sits in the back and complains most of the time, I will have no reasons to want to interact with them in the future. Similarly, if I am in a group with other players on WoW and one of them does nothing but complain about how the group is performing, or the order in which the group is doing things, I would wish to never group with them again. Conversely, if a person in either situation is positive and offers interesting suggestions or insight, I would gladly look forward to interacting with them, and possibly developing some future relationship.

Important aspects in any relationship are intimacy and self-disclosure, as stated in Social Penetration Theory. While FTF communication provides those in relationships time and physical presence for them to self-disclose and increase intimacy, CMC simply provides a different environment for the same to happen (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Ramirez, A. & Zhang, 2007; Young-ok & Hara, 2005). In addition to providing a different environment, CMC also provides a greater amount of time for communication to occur, allowing those involved to disclose at their own pace. This lack of time constraint, as well as the facelessness of the Internet, may allow people to disclose more than they would in a FTF relationship (Cole & Griffiths, 2007); this
increase in disclosure may also be seen as a way for people to increase intimacy to make up for the lack of physical presence or other cues (Rabby, 2007). Despite the fact that CMC lacks the social presence of FTF, levels of self-disclosure may increase, leading to higher levels of intimacy and trust, which also leads to higher levels of relationship quality (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Ramirez, A. & Zhang, 2007; Young-ok & Hara, 2005). Looking at my own relationships online, many of them have spanned years (anywhere from two to thirteen), while I only have a handful of relationships outside of family that have lasted to the same extent. Having the facelessness of the Internet has made it easier to disclose more than I would face to face, and I often find myself disclosing more via CMC in an effort to increase intimacy simply because I cannot reach out and touch my partner. My most intimate relationships are those that are either fully computer-mediated or those that span both CMC and FTF, because I have an unlimited amount of time to communicate, and some things are easier said without a physical presence there to intimidate me or make me feel self-conscious.

Other relational aspects that are represented differently in FTF and CMC are those of relational-maintenance behaviors and affinity expression. Simply because the relationship exists online doesn’t mean that it does not have to be maintained nor that affinity isn’t expressed. Instead of being expressed nonverbally through vocalic changes and body language, they are expressed verbally (Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005; Rabby, 2007), which supports Social Information Processing Theory’s emphasis on content. Because CMC relationships lack the capacity to “engage in activities and to share in the social events that most couples do, these relationships exist entirely in the communication that they engage in with each other” (Rabby, 2007, p. 332). This focus on communication means that relationships are maintained through “self-disclosure and sharing information with their partners” (Rabby, 2007, p. 332) rather than
going to the mall or a party as partners would offline. Because partners in CMC relationships cannot express their affinity for one another through smiling or other signs of nonverbal warmth, they also focus on verbal content (Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). Some examples found in Walther, Loh, and Granka’s (2005) study were “explicit statements of positive affection…, being indirect in disagreements, and offering praise while proposing a different idea” (p. 58).

Reflecting on my recent duties as an officer in my guild, I have found myself prefacing some statements with “I really like your idea, but why don’t we try ___ in addition to that?” or, communicating to guild mates in whispers, statements such as “You are awesome” and “You’re my hero!”

One aspect that touches on the subject of affinity expression is the use of emoticons (generally read by tilting your head to one side – I type all my emoticons so they should be read with my head tilted to the left). Critics of CMC relationships have stated that the medium lacks vital nonverbal cues. Over the course of time, CMC users have adapted to the medium (as mentioned in SIPT) by using emoticons to act as nonverbal cues (Krohn, 2004). Simple smiley-faces, such as =), or even more elaborate ones, such as <:-D~, can be used to attach an emotion to a statement, such as one expressing affinity (Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). Emoticons are also used to attach emotions to statements for anger, uncertainty, and sadness. They can also take the place of facial expressions that one would use in FTF communication; one example of this was in talking to my boyfriend about my upcoming Senior Thesis class. When I told him that the thesis paper would be much longer than my current assignment, I told him that “I gotta do it… though I’m =\ about it.”

Adding to the list of nonverbal cues that can be expressed in CMC, specifically Internet gamer relationships, is the control of a player’s character in the online world. Massively
Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) often allow for players to move their character in three dimensions (sometimes in 360 degree space, such as flight in WoW). With this freedom, players are able to face their characters towards one another while speaking; some games even allow control to the extent of eye gaze, such as in Second Life (Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, & Merget, 2007). The addition of these nonverbal cues allows partners in CMC relationships more avenues to express intimacy and affinity. These additions have also demonstrated how social norms in the physical world are translated into the online: “male-male dyads have larger interpersonal distances than female-female dyads…male-male dyads maintain less eye contact than female-female dyads…and decreases in interpersonal distance are compensated with gaze avoidance” (Yee et. al, 2007, p. 115). While WoW does not provide for the control of eye contact in game, players have full freedom of movement to place and orient their characters in relation to others’. Personal examples I have experienced or witnessed have been when my boyfriend and I are talking in WoW; I will either hop into the sidecar of his motorcycle (WoW allows for characters to have a variety of mounts to speed up travel), or we will sit and face each other over a fire. Another example was when a friend was telling me about his observations of his then-girlfriend’s interactions with another man; their characters were facing each other with a few inches of space between them (sadly, about a week after the observation, she left the guild, and him).

One last example of nonverbal cues that have been adapted or introduced into the online environment are vocalic. With advances in technology, it has become commonplace for CMC users to use voice programs to communicate. Vocal interaction via CMC may be performed in or out of game for multiple purposes. My guild in WoW (as well as most others, or even simply between smaller groups of players or dyads) relies heavily on a program called Ventrilo to
facilitate planning in raids; we also use it as a tool to socialize while we are independently playing in game. With Ventrilo, players have the option of joining password-protected or open channels; allowing players to talk to one other person, or up to the channel’s limit (we’ve had 30 people in one channel before). This introduction of voice to the online community has found “increases in liking and trust...as well as insulation from unexpected negative impacts of text-only play” (Williams, Caplan, & Xiong, 2007, p. 427). Because players are able to hear and interpret vocalic cues of pitch, tone, and emotion, we are better able to understand a point someone is trying to make; it also makes it easier because it allows for faster communication. Affinity cues that were previously only limited to FTF communication may also be provided through voice programs. In my personal experiences of having Ventrilo to communicate with my boyfriend, I’ve found that our levels of intimacy and warmth are increased from what they would have been if we only had the text-base.

Another vital element of WoW, as well as other MMOs, is its ability to act as a “third place” that facilitates social interaction (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Third places provide “spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home...for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old” (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p. 886). Having these open, neutral, and comfortable spaces provides an open area for players to interact on a wide scale. In WoW, players have the option to message a single person, their party of up to five people, their guild (up to however many people are on, say, one to one hundred), or hundreds of players through a general chat channel. In these various channels can be found examples of Accommodation Theory and Speech Codes Theory. Accommodation and Speech Codes share a principle of convergence, where interactants will attempt to accommodate each other by altering their behaviors to be more similar (Griffin, 2009).
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WoW can be seen as its own cultural community where everyone shares a common speech code, that of Internet gamers. Players who are new to the community are actively trying to accommodate to other players by adopting their speaking mannerisms to gain a more positive response. An example of this would be a new player refraining from typing in all capital letters; performing the opposite would only engender derision and annoyance from the general populace because it is generally seen as yelling. Following along the same lines of all capitals, players may type in them to convey sarcasm or a joking attitude, often followed by other players replying in the same fashion; an outsider would not likely understand the shift from yelling to joking because they are unfamiliar with the nuances of the speech code.

Continuing with accommodation and speech codes, the use of emoticons can be interpreted using both theories. As mentioned earlier, emoticons can be used to attach emotions or replace facial expressions in communication. A player new to WoW, or the Internet in general, may begin using emoticons when they type to try and fit in, and to also try and convey positive emotions toward someone they are forming a relationship with. Research has also found that emoticons can be seen as a generational speech code, and the frequency of their use can indicate in which generation they were born (Krohn, 2004). That isn’t to say players with a gap as large as 20 or more years cannot accommodate each other or use the same speech code; I have been in raids with people over 40 years of age, and someone as young as 14 who were able to communicate without a problem.

Part of the speech code within my own guild reflects an identification of homosexual orientation, and homoerotic jokes and nuances run throughout people’s communication. Those who identify as straight (truly or not), are given shocked faces and outbursts, all in a good natured way. This serves to reinforce the bonds between members and allows everyone a way to
identify their peers. In another guild on my server, their speech code includes the banning of the phrase “lol” (laughing out loud); other forms of laughter are permitted, but those three letters quickly get someone muted in guild chat, ostracized for a length of time determined of their number of offenses.

My guild will also employ methods of divergence towards applicants on our forums. Members who respond on the forums often will intentionally violate the applicant’s expectations in their response in some form or another. They often take the form of blunt criticism or critique to an intimidating and probing question to something more inane. The reason for this is to observe how the applicant reacts to such a violation; it might well serve as a gauge for future interactions with them when they take part in guild affairs. If an applicant is unable to accommodate to the guild’s methods, they are often a poor suit for the environment in general.

One aspect not mentioned in SIPT is that of relationships that utilize both FTF and CMC. Research has found mixed results in relationships that span both depending on where the relationship originated and the amount of time spent before switching from one to the other (Ramirez, A. & Zhang, 2007). Ramirez and Zhang’s (2007) study found that “CMC-only partnerships exhibited incremental gains in intimacy and social attraction, forecast increasingly more rewarding associations, reported less uncertainty, and sought more information from partners over time” (p. 303). Their study also found that, should CMC partners meet FTF, it is best to do it shortly after the relationship is formed so as to avoid the idealization and heightened expectations that are often developed in CMC (Ramirez, A. & Zhang, 2007). As for players who know each other FTF and move onto CMC, it can redefine their relationship, “often in more equitable terms than what may be possible in day-to-day offline life (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p. 891). One mother found that gaming with her daughter allowed their relationship to
become more equal and they were able to “[talk] much more about her [daughter’s] life and ideas (Yee, 2006)” (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006, p. 891).

Considering my own relationships that exist in both CMC and FTF, I find most of them to be richer than if they had solely remained in one environment or the other. My relationship with my boyfriend originated on WoW and progressed to FTF, where it currently resides in both. I don’t think that our meeting FTF dampened our levels of intimacy or attraction at all; conversely, I believe it’s only grown. My guild has also changed our “third place” of interaction on a few occasions from that of WoW to going to Vegas for a weekend. Our time spent there has only increased our closeness as a group, and is often a source of fond memories cited to other players in the guild; it also serves as a way for newer members to socialize with more senior ones.

Taking into account research and my own personal experiences, I believe that CMC relationships are able to rival or surpass those in FTF. Following the basic principle of SIPT in that CMC users adapt to the medium, I believe that the emphasis on content combined with the new technologies of voice programs allows for greater levels of intimacy and self-disclosure that are an important part of Social Penetration Theory. WoW users have become a culture of their own where they have developed their own speech code, and players who interact are often found accommodating one another in regards to character placement and orientation, and speech mannerisms. Overall, I believe some of my richest relationships exist utilizing both environments, and I will continue to maintain them as such.
References


