

Matthew M., "The Prisoner's Dilemma and Factional Conflict in World of Warcraft," June 2005

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## Introduction

In Blizzard's newest achievement, World of Warcraft, the two main factions (the Horde and the Alliance) are separated at inception and encouraged to fight while prevented from communicating. While many players enjoy this aspect of the game, there are instances of cooperation between the two factions where players will peacefully coexist for periods of time or even actively assist each other in their conquests in the level. While the field of interpersonal cooperation offers insights into how members of opposing sides can manage to overcome the forced separation placed upon them, it is only by talking with people who play the game that we are able to apply these insights in any practical and real life way. Examining cooperation between members of the Horde and the Alliance through the interaction outlined by Prisoner's Dilemma and the theory of reciprocity can help understand players' motivation for bucking the trends and finding ways to coexist with their enemies.

## Literature Review

Theoretical support for communication between the two factions can be found in the field of interpersonal cooperation. Prisoner's Dilemma, a game dealing with self-interested cooperation between two individuals, provides the framework for peaceful coexistence. PD is a non-zero-sum game in which participants can be successful or unsuccessful depending on whether they work together or alone. Two players are given two choices, either to cooperate with the other player or to defect. The typical data chart is as follows: if both players cooperate, each player gets three points; if one player cooperates and one defects, the player that defects gets five points while the cooperating player receives nothing; and finally, if both players defect, then each player receives one point. A variation of this is the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, which calls for participants to make their choices again and again while retaining their memory of the previous results (Wikipedia).

It is this last version of PD that is the most relevant to oppositional communication. Robert Axelrod, a writer and researcher into the field of interpersonal cooperation, established patterns within the iterated PD that showed the most successful approach. Axelrod found that, looking at a large number of players using different strategies over a long period of time, "greedy" approaches tended to be less individually rewarding and more "altruistic" approaches fared better. This was supported by observations from an iterated PD tournament that Axelrod held, inviting people from around the world to design computer programs to compete with each other. The winning program was also the simplest: at only four lines of code, Anatol Rapoport's "Tit-for-Tat" program would cooperate the first time and then do whatever the opponent did the turn before (Wikipedia). This program was successful for two reasons; first, it was never responsible for initiating a cycle of mutual defections, and two, it would respond directly to its opponents' actions. If the opponent defected, it would respond quickly by defecting, but if the opponent wanted to cooperate, then it would be cooperative in turn. This system of responsive interaction not only provides an applicable situation in where cooperation between enemies can exist, but it also suggests that cooperation (instead of hostility) is the most effective route towards personal gain (Axelrod, 1984).

Another theoretical possibility behind cooperation between the factions is the idea of reciprocity. In another chapter in his book, Axelrod writes about reciprocity during the trench warfare days of World War 1. Despite the obvious, that the Allies and the Germans were at war, Axelrod delves into surprisingly common instances where the two sides, deeply entrenched as they were, would develop unspoken alliances whereby neither side would really attempt to kill the members of the other. This system of reciprocity, or "live-and-let-live", came into being when both sides realized that if they exercised a particular kind of restraint, the other side might respond in kind (Axelrod, 1984). This realization was brought about because of the proximity and longevity of trench warfare: according to Axelrod, "with sustained interaction, the stable outcome could be mutual cooperation based upon reciprocity." When each side realized that there was an alternative to fighting, and that the other side was open to alternatives other than fighting, both the Allies and the Germans developed a relationship where neither side would be the first to defect, but would respond if the opposing side defected.

The ability to respond, while perhaps never acted upon, was important to the "live-and-let-live" approach. By demonstrating their military prowess (such as snipers showing off their skills within view of the opposing forces or surgical and non-lethal artillery strikes), both sides were able to show that their system of restraint was not due to any weakness. Another thing that allowed this system of reciprocity to survive was the way the soldiers perpetuated the system. The soldiers who were experienced with the system of reciprocity that had developed between the two sides would actively inform the new troops being rotated onto the line. This way the "live-and-let-live" philosophy was able to flourish through unofficial channels.

These two approaches to interpersonal communications, the idea of reciprocity and the Prisoner's Dilemma, are viable ways to explore interaction between the Horde and Alliance characters. The important thing about these two mindsets is that they both approach the idea of cooperation from a self-serving standpoint; the people involved are willing to help their opponents but only because they are directly helping themselves by doing so. This is an important aspect of analyzing player motivations in an MMORPG; since this study is concerned primarily with individual interaction, looking at one-on-one relationships instead of guild and faction motivations, it is important to approach the concept from a self-driven perspective. Looking at the player's responses as an approach that benefits them allows for oppositional cooperation without making assumptions that they are somehow "nicer" or "kinder" than the average player.

## Study Design

The study, which has undergone several changes throughout the semester, was ultimately developed from the qualitative approach. While I had originally intended to include a wealth of quantitative data, giving the participants several options and letting them choose which one applied to them, the desire to have participants answer the questions in their own words and share relevant stories made me realize the error of my original approach. If this study had been designed as a statistical approach, i.e. how many people cooperate with opposing characters and the generalized circumstances, then I could have justified taking a quantitative turn. It was only after researching Prisoner's Dilemma and reciprocity that I decided I wanted to understand the player's mindsets and motivations to see how they fit in with the interpersonal cooperation theories. The question that I ultimately decided to ask was, what player motivations exist that allow for interpersonal communication between the opposing factions?

While conducting research for my original survey idea (looking into the stories and history of WoW and how it affected the players), I made several decisions about how I would

change the interview process for my final research question. Although I had originally intended to conduct in-game interviews, I found that to be a frustrating process. In my experience, many people will not be responsive while they are in-game; regardless of the reason they have for playing, from escapism to flow state, they are in the middle of a game and a researcher is an interruption. As a researcher, you would not ask someone questions while they are playing Dance Dance Revolution in an arcade. While there is considerably more down time in WoW than in the typical arcade game, people are still actively involved with some aspect of the game. I found that even if I could get someone to talk about their WoW experiences inside the game, they would often give short, choppy answers and not feel the need to elaborate on what they said.

In my mind, Internet forums are the best source of survey information for MMORPGs. Forums appeal to people that are more passionate than the average gamer; it allows them an opportunity to engage with WoW outside of the game, and also offers a place to participate with their in-game community. While this does limit the data somewhat by eliminating the "casual" gamer from the data pool, as a researcher you are more likely to receive in-depth answers from people who are more active in the game and understand its nuances. I ended up submitting my survey to 11 internet forums, with mixed results. Several forums were more active than others, and I received the majority of my information from both the Ironfist Guild forum and IGN's forum. One of the sites, worldofwar.net, actually removed my thread and had a mod explain to me why myself and the rest of the class were not welcome to post there (he compared it to me setting up a three-card Monty table in the corner of someone's bar).

My survey consisted of seven questions, the first five of which were particularly relevant to my research and the last two being more of "throw-ins" I was curious about.

1) Outside of raids, how do you generally approach characters from the opposite faction?

2) Suppose you are planning on questing in an area and you see an opposing character already there. Depending on that character's level in relation to yours, how do you approach the situation?

3) Now suppose you were there first and an opposing character shows up while you are questing. Depending on that character's level in relation to yours, how do you react to their presence?

4) Have you ever been assisted by an opposing character when being attacked by creatures? What was the situation and how did you respond?

5) Have you ever defended an opposing character from an attack? What was the situation and how did they respond?

6) In maps with both Horde and Alliance cities, do you believe it is possible for both sides to coexist? Why or why not?

7) Do you think that Blizzard should allow for communication between the factions?  
Why or why not?

These questions were designed with a twist: while they do not explicitly rule out group interaction and questing, there is a bias in the questions that implies individual interaction. This was an important part of the survey; after playing the game, it is obvious that any interaction involving more than one player from each side quickly degenerates into fighting or ganking. The questions were also designed to overlap slightly and cover the participants' thought process from first seeing an opposing character to their subsequent behavior around the character. Also, by asking participants to recall specific situations and instances where they helped or were helped by an opposing character, the survey prevents them from taking an anti-opponent stance that overrides their actual experiences. It is my belief that people respond differently in individual encounters than they do in groups or with their guilds; even players who embrace the separation and make the other faction their sworn enemy will react differently if by themselves. While the issue of group mentality was not addressed in my survey (an oversight I would correct if repeating the project), the survey was carefully worded to make sure that participants were reflecting on their individual encounters and not their overall impressions of the other faction.

## Results and Discussion

After compiling all the data from the survey, there were several trends that jumped out right away. First of all was that players, for the most part, did not immediately look to fight every enemy who showed up on their map. Many players would first consider the situation or the other person's level relative to their own. People were particularly likely to look for ways to cooperate when they were involved in an activity of their own; while eight participants gave responses that suggested initial cooperation in a general setting, eleven responded by saying they do not look to fight while involved in a quest. The following are examples of typical responses given to me by the participants:

- I usually wave if I see them first. This can either get my head turn into a brick or it doesn't.
- I let that person do what they are doing, and I do what I am doing.
- If he attacks, I will defend myself.
- I will attempt to make contact, bow, wave or salute to them, then try to fight on the other side of the questing area.

There was also a smaller selection of people who had cultivated, as one participant put it, "a healthy hatred of my enemy." These people generally did not want to have anything to do with the other faction that did not involve violence; one participant answered almost every question by saying "kill them." Some examples of this:

- I attack because we are on a PvP server, thats the name of the game.
- I haven't played much yet, but I know that I would immediatly attack them unless they're level is much lower than mine.
- by killing them
- Kill them.

Roughly estimated, I would say that about two-thirds of the people surveyed responded in ways that seemed to suggest they were open to interpersonal communication between the factions, while a final third responded with the animosity that Blizzard hopes to cultivate. Within these generalizations, I feel that I was able to acquire a large cross-section of data and player motivations. Not everyone had the same reasoning behind their interaction with the opposing faction, but the differences in the information were valuable in understanding why people acted the way they did. Overall, I was surprised by the data I collected; I had expected there to be a larger number of people that fought the enemy or ran away in most every situation. See the attached data sheet for a complete list of the participant's responses.

There are several ways in which the literature review can be applied to the survey responses. First, the language that the participants used to describe their interaction with the opposing faction corresponds to the reactions described by the Prisoner's Dilemma. The Prisoner's Dilemma is especially relevant in WoW because of the existence of turn-based combat. When two characters of approximate levels engage in combat, the first turn of combat is extremely important; many player types directly benefit from being able to cast the first spell or fire the first projectile. It is important to remember that the Prisoner's Dilemma game, while outlying a potentially cooperative situation between adversaries, is driven entirely by the players' self-interest. None of the respondents gave an answer that suggested they viewed the other character's motivations as equal or more important to their own; each participant reacted to an encounter with their own best interest in mind. Consider the following response:

I don't attack anyone - I'm a priest so I try to stay peaceful unless provoked. If he's higher level I'll move on, if he's lower then he better make room.

While this player admittedly goes out of his way to avoid conflict, it is only a product of this player's own desires. Playing as a priest, the participant's interpersonal communication is driven by the desire to role-play the pacifistic healer. The importance of role-playing and reputation to this player has caused them to unknowingly develop the "Tit-for-Tat" system, where they will initially cooperate and then base their subsequent behavior on the actions of their opponent. This system seemed to be the dominant strategy among the people surveyed; in response to questions two and three, many of the people surveyed said that they would first assess the situation to see what the risk was to them but would not attack unless threatened. Ironically, this development of this system of cooperation owes a great deal to Blizzard's continued efforts to separate the two factions. According to Axelrod, one of the most appealing features of the "tit-for-tat" system is its straightforward nature (Axelrod, 1984); by establishing clear and easy to understand links between cooperation and returned cooperation, defection and returned defection, the "tit-for-tat" system is the most obvious way to communicate between the factions. Again, these responses were driven more by self-interest than true altruism; when involved in individual activities such as questing or item farming, it is often in a player's best interest to avoid needless combat.

Another direct correlation between the research and WoW is the existence of trench warfare within the game. In contested areas such as Hillsbrad, both Alliance and Horde settlements exist and it is common to see members of the opposite faction throughout the level. According to Axelrod, it is this prolonged proximity between the factions that allows interaction to occur (Axelrod, 1984). In many of the earlier levels it is rare to see characters from the opposing faction in your general area. One of the participants responded in the survey by saying that they were "too low" to worry about cross-factional interaction, but for the majority, it was common to see members of the opposite side. Axelrod identifies this as an ideal situation for the development of the "live-and-let-live" philosophy, saying that "under suitable circumstances, cooperation can develop even between antagonists" (Axelrod, 1984). By constantly interacting with opposing characters, many of the players had come to the same

conclusion that the soldiers in Axelrod's example came to: if they were to demonstrate a particular type of restraint, then the opposing faction might catch on and reciprocate. In a future study it would be interesting to see how player's reactions to opposing characters change as the characters level.

An interesting deviation in my study from the "live-and-let-live" philosophy of Axelrod is the occurrence of player intervention between the two factions. Questions four and five asked players to describe situations where they actively participated in helping or were helped by members of the other faction, and a surprising number of participants admitted to helping or being helped by their opponents. This deviates from Axelrod's examples from World War 1 trench warfare; while the two sides often developed a "live-and-let-live" philosophy, there was still enough of a separation of "us vs. them" to prevent soldiers from actively assisting their opponents.

By my own negotiated readings of the surveys, I found there to be 8 participants who said they had defended members of the other faction and 11 participants who said they had been defended. These instances of interpersonal defense often broke from the norm of reciprocity; many of the people who provided examples of these situations described the character that intervened to be of a higher level than the character that was being attacked. Because the lower-level characters are incapable of returning the favor (defending the higher-level characters from their level of mobs), these actions are seemingly altruistic in nature. The higher-level characters simply took pity on their lower-level adversaries and intervened on their behalf. However, it is possible to view these actions as part of a self-interested approach. By exhibiting dominance over the mobs that are killing the lower-level characters, the actions of the higher-level characters could be construed as "showing off" and exhibiting control over life and death as far as their opponents are concerned. An important question I wish I'd asked is the player's motivation in intervening on the other character's behalf; being able to discern between self-interested and altruistic motivations would have helped in the study of reciprocity between the characters.

## Obstacles

There are some obstacles to interpersonal cooperation between the two factions. While players are willing to cooperate on an individual basis, the creation of guilds and raid groups effectively destroys the balance that is created by the "live-and-let-live" philosophy. Trench raids essentially ended the idea of reciprocity between the Allies and the Germans in World War 1; because of the constant disruptions and the unpredictable nature that is caused by raiding, the established systems of cooperation collapsed. In WoW, the ideas of level provide the backbone for both raiding and the "us vs. them" mindset. After a certain point in the game, there is very little left to achieve and the only serviceable enemy that remains is the players of the other faction. As players strive towards these higher levels, they are more likely to group and guild with people and begin raiding their enemies. As characters become more socially active and begin to think of themselves as more than just an individual in a hostile environment, they begin to buy into the idea of "us vs. them" that is perpetuated between the factions. The more players that are involved, the less likely you are to have cooperation among adversaries.

It was interesting to see the different results that Desiree and I presented. Part of the differences came from the nature of our surveys; while I was looking at individual interaction, she seemed to be looking more at group mentality and how individuals fit into Blizzard's "bigger picture." Surprisingly, although our data looks different at first glance, I actually found it to be encouraging. A lot of the information that we presented seemed to be redundant; I found that people tended to cooperate individually and Dez discovered that people, although

participating in Blizzard's factional separation overall, would sometimes find ways to circumvent the inability to communicate. Some of the information she had to offer, such as the background on the WoW storyline, was also very interesting; considering that the two factions are technically not at war, why is Blizzard making it so difficult for people to not fight? In another dimension quite similar to ours, I would do the project again and invite Desiree to work alongside me. With my human character and her undead character, and approaching the same idea from different sides, I think we could have done an excellent job of fleshing it out.

Another major obstacle to the idea of interpersonal cooperation between the factions is the recently implemented honor system in WoW. Simply put, the system works similar to the way characters receive experience by killing mobs; the higher an opponent or a select NPC is in relation to a player's level, the more honor points a player can obtain by killing them. This system was implemented shortly after Blizzard banned l33t-speak between the factions, and is another effort by the game designers to create separation and competition between the two factions. The system comes with its own build-in reward process; the more honor points a player acquires, the higher the player's rank becomes. Rising in rank gives players access to new game content, such as an officer's barracks that is closed off to characters below a certain rank and equipment that can only be purchased within said barracks. By offering players rewards for honorable PvP kills, Blizzard is producing incentives for increased combat between the factions.

While this idea will probably not spell the end of interpersonal cooperation between the factions, it does deal it a serious blow. If the soldiers in Axelrod's example had been offered monetary incentives for killing members of the other side, would a system of reciprocity have been able to develop? In their surveys, many participants acknowledged the creation of the honor system and the way it affected the gameplay. Several participants acknowledged a change in their own play based on the new system. One player referred to helping other players as something he always did "before the honor system," and another admitted that he was trying to rise in ranks and would attack Orcs he could receive honor points from. With any opponent potential points, the game's designers are removing the choices from the Prisoner's Dilemma and leaving players with a situation where cooperation yields nothing and defection offers the greatest amount of points. Even the rare players that are willing to cooperate with the other faction are now confronted with an opponent less likely to cooperate in turn; any individual character is now assumed to be any enemy, and groups of two or more are instantly assumed to be ganking parties.

Finally, from a technical perspective, Blizzard's implementation of an honor system has potentially negative effects on its quality of service. Academics at the communal blogspot Terra Nova have already commented on the foolishness of encouraging players to participate in massive raids while they are still underserver-ed and overpopulated. Since the honor system is in its very early stages, the verdict is still out on what the possible outcomes will be, but general feedback is already negative (Kearns, 2005). However, in the field of interpersonal communications and cooperation between the factions, the honor system is already a crippling blow to the already difficult prospect of getting players between the two factions to interact. Blizzard continues to create many good reasons for the two sides to fight to the death and very few reasons (or means) for them to peacefully coexist.

## Conclusion

After researching interpersonal cooperation in World of Warcraft, the separation between individual and communal motivations looms large. As individual players continue to interact on a one-on-one basis within the levels, many players are willing to cooperate with the opposing faction in order to lessen the risk to themselves and increase their productivity.

Tenuous alliances are formed between opposing characters based on the repeated enactment of the Prisoner's Dilemma game and the cooperative theory of reciprocity. However, some players buy into the ideas of conflict enforced and perpetuated by Blizzard, and with an increase in characters comes the likelihood of a breakdown in cooperation. Innovations such as the newly developed honor system further prevent cooperation between the factions. As Blizzard continues to draw lines in the sand between the two sides, it will be increasingly difficult for cooperation between the two factions to exist. Barring a change in Blizzard's gameplay mechanics, the fragile instances of cooperative play that occur within the game will become less common, but some players will see the "tit-for-tat" method as being a way around the communication restriction imposed upon players and continue to strive for cooperation.

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