

Bonds of trust: An in-depth look
at social bonding within MMO guilds
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Abstract

Do social bonding and the process of forming friendships occur in virtual worlds as they do in real life? The answer may very well be "yes," as it can be shown that such bonds do often occur between guild mates. These bonds are formed in a variety of ways, from participating with others in group content to using voice chat programs in order to communicate with other players. Furthermore, these relationships between players fairly consistently bridge the gap between reality and the virtual worlds in which these people meet. Often, friendships are a result of not one factor which contributes to bonding, but rather stem from a combination of factors which together form the gel that holds these players together.

Overview

Guilds are an almost universal presence in any major MMORPG, from World of Warcraft to Lineage II. In my personal experience within virtual worlds, I have seen players many times claim that the only reason they are still playing a given game is the other players whom they have come to know in-game. To me, this signifies that some sort of significant online friendships must be formed among a number of the MMORPG player pool. For my project, I wished to try to decipher at least a few ways in which these friendships are formed. Hence, I chose to look at the social structure and bonding which occurs within individual guilds, primarily in the games of WoW and EQ2. My reasoning for this is fairly simple; guilds are the most identifiable groups of players in these games. It is very difficult to track down the entire social network on a server, but it is much easier to look at social bonding within a smaller group of players, and guilds provide a perfect medium in which to do so. Essentially, my question is two fold: Do guilds form close social bonds and facilitate trust between members, and if so how do they achieve this?

Some may question the necessity or validity of this study, asking why it matters how and why players within guilds form social bonds with each other. However, there are many valid concerns within virtual worlds that this topic addresses. As mentioned above, many players of MMOs continue playing a given game for an extended period of time because of the people they meet in-game. Game developers could be greatly interested in this sort of research, as they naturally wish to extend the average game play life-span of their player-base. After all, the longer an individual plays a game, the more times they pay the monthly fee many MMO's charge. Hence, developers would be interested in how

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<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/students.html>

to adjust game mechanics in order for their game to achieve longevity and thus increase profit substantially. In addition to this reason, prospective guild leaders may also find much of this research useful to them, in regards to finding what works to achieve social bonds within guilds. Granted, this is not a paper on guild leadership, but by its very nature certain topics of discussion could prove very useful to a person who wishes to establish a successful guild in a MMO.

Outside of the gaming industry, this study could also serve some interest in the field of sociology. Academics may very well be interested in how a person can establish a rapport with others online when they have never even met this person in real life. Evidence of social bonding in these games could lead to some interesting discussions on how humans in general develop bonds of trust between each other.

Literature Review

The importance of friendship in on-line games

In order to properly look at social bonding in virtual worlds, one start at the basic level of friendship and its importance to the player base. Nick Yee (2003) reports that approximately 34% of MMO players cite "making friends" as the most important aspect of the game. Additionally, about 5.4% of persons claim that playing an active role in a guild as most important. This means that roughly 40% of MMO players cite social interaction with others as their primary reason for playing these sorts of games. Yee's study is perhaps the only direct information on these numbers that is available, but there exists much corroborating evidence to suggest socialization is a huge reason to participate in these virtual worlds. Conversation and social interaction are often referenced as the "main activity" of virtual worlds (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2004; Yee, 2005). About 78% of Everquest players are in a guild of some sort, along with 83% of Ultima Online subscribers. Also, 73% of Ultima Online users report maintaining a consistent circle of in-game friends whom they play with, and the same percentage also claim to use ICQ to communicate in-game (Yee, 2003; Kolo & Baur 2004). ICQ is one of the first instant messaging services, along the lines of MSN Messenger or AIM. It allows you to chat, anonymously if you so choose, in any number of different online "rooms" about any topic you like.

Somewhat contradictory to these findings is a recent study done on World of Warcraft. In this study, the researcher found that only 62% percent of WoW players belonged to a guild, and 17% of such individuals were in a one-person guild; essentially a custom personal tag over their head as opposed to an interactive social group of players (Ducheneaut, 2006). However, in my view this information is rather limited due to the way it was gathered. The information gathering in this case was done solely through the use of bots, and included no player surveys or interviews. These bots took down information regarding the population of five different servers, the most important information being taken down being character level, group status, location, and guild affiliation. While it could be argued that the automation of bots, and the fact that they can record all sorts of data and interactions that a human cannot possibly observe makes

them superior to human researchers, I believe that this method alone is insufficient.

My primary argument involves Ducheneaut's finding that the average guild member only interacts with other members about twenty minutes per month of real time. This was primarily determined by looking at what zones of the world guild members were in, seeing if other guild members were in that zone, and looking at whether or not guild members were grouped with each other. Quite frankly, while this information may indeed provide some valuable insight into guilds in WoW, it is by no means a definitive picture. Much interaction between guild members which could occur in other ways is not charted in this study. For example, instances of chat in guild channels or personally between members is not cited at all in the study. A major part of interacting with online friends and guild members is chatting, and it is a flaw to completely ignore this aspect of the game. Additionally, guild members can be interacting with each other while they are in different zones, via chat and other situations. For example, two members may be collecting materials in different zones in a cooperative effort in order to make an item in-game. This is just one of countless such examples which are not addressed in this particular study. Ducheneaut's conclusion that WoW guilds are "not highly social and/or collaborative environments" is valuable information, but simply does not take all aspects of guild social interaction into account.

Group affiliation in the real world

While I am looking at personal and group relationships within virtual worlds, it is highly beneficial to look at research regarding group dynamics in real life. Seeing as all players in these games are real people, it seems reasonable that many of the social dynamics seen in-game parallel those seen in real life in some fashion. Perhaps the first such area to look into is the idea of common goals, and the reasons a group actually forms in the first place.

It is no secret that the vast majority of the world's populace seeks group membership in some form in their lives. Whether in the form of a fraternity, professional association, sports team, academic honor society, there seems to be a group for everyone. But why do people actually decide to join such groups? One very important reason is to achieve goals and interests the person holds as an individual. Oftentimes personal goals are only attainable via joining a group. The ability to achieve such goals is a significant motivator for an individual to make the decision to join a group (Festinger 1951; Coyle 1972; Bonner 1959). Coyle states that "behind any group affiliation, there exists in the individuals the interests upon which it rests" (Coyle 33). That is to say, there is an individual motivation underlying a member's decision to become a member of a group. The same could certainly pertain to players in virtual worlds attempting to join various guilds. Guilds by their very nature serve some sort of purpose. For example, one guild may focus on high-end raid content, while another may be strictly concerned with player-vs.-player game play. Either way, guild members clearly have a common goal in these two situations, much like members of a college football have the common goal of playing well and winning games.

Factors of group cohesion

Now that some reasoning as to why an individual joins with a particular group in the first place has been discussed, it is time to move into the realm of group cohesion. What exactly contributes to an overall sense of unity and feelings of belonging? Perhaps the first condition which is necessary for group cohesion is the adherence by all members of the group to certain group norms (Bonner 1959). In other words, group members at least need to have some sort of common understandings and view certain things from the same perspective. This can easily be seen among the guilds of MMOs. For example, a hard-core endgame raider would have little place in a guild whose social norm was to place a priority on player vs. player content. The presence of such a player would harm the overall cohesion of the guild.

Another thing which is just as necessary for group cohesion is active and meaningful participation by all members of the group in achieving goals. Essentially, a member must feel that they are personally involved in the group's doings in order to feel what is known as esprit de corps, which essentially means they identify with the group, and have a sense of team spirit. This is seen in particular in an experiment in which boys were separated into groups, one having a dictator-like authority figure telling them what camping supplies were more important, the other having a participatory authority which allowed the boys to give their own input. The children in the participatory group reported much greater satisfaction with their group. (Bonner, 1959; Coyle, 1972; Festinger, 1951) Parallel to this is the idea that friendships and bonds are formed much more easily when consistent contact occurs between individuals. This is seen within a studies cited by the authors above, one which determined that persons living next door to each other were much more likely to develop friendship than those who were 4-5 houses apart. (Festinger, 1951) Essentially, proximity and consistent interaction together with meaningful involvement in the group positively affect group cohesion.

One more area which needs to be discussed in relation to social bonding within guilds is the concept of closed social groups, such as Greek organizations or country clubs. Admittance to such is not by any means automatic, and it is often considerably difficult for an outsider to become a member in such an organization. A prime example of this is seen in the Trinity University Greek system. Prospective new members participate in a rush process for a little over a semester, interacting with members of organizations they may aspire to be a member of. Fraternities and sororities slowly whittle down their lists of prospective members, and then vote to extend certain individuals a "bid" to join their organization (http://www.trinity.edu/departments/cci/greek_life.htm). The same can be said of many guilds in online games. Many guilds have strict requirements an applicant must meet before he/she is given membership into the guild. Take, for example, the recruiting policies of the guild NO Quarter on the Suramar server in WoW. In order to be considered, you first have to play a character class the guild is currently in need of, and be able to enter end-game dungeons which require special keys. Additionally, you must be willing to participate in guild raids on a consistent basis (<http://noquarterguild.org/recruitment.php>). This description certainly is indicative of an exclusive society. It is also important

to note that respect for your fellow guild member and loyalty to the guild itself are also requirements.

Even after a player is accepted into a closed guild, his membership is not necessarily a guarantee. Many guilds institute a sort of trial phase for a new members, in which the member often participates in content with established guild members and they judge the new recruit in terms of competency and attitude. A few guilds that have this policy are NO Quarter, Dropbears Incorporated, and Fist of the Horde. (<http://noquarterguild.org/recruitment.php>, <http://dropbears.servebeer.com/forums/index.php?topic=73.0>, <http://www.fistofthehorde.com/phpbb2/viewtopic.php?t=21>) At the end of the stated period, a decision is usually made regarding the membership of the new recruit: either they are accepted as a full member of the organization, or declined membership because they do not meet the standards of the guild, or they simply do not mesh with all ready established guild members. This secondary step of the trial period is analogous to the real life example of Greek pledging. A Greek pledge is defined as "a person undergoing a trial period before formal initiation into a fraternity or sorority" (Webster's, 1989). Essentially, the pledge must prove their value and worth to the organization before they are allowed to become a full member. The ways in which this is done are generally kept very secret by the individual Greek organizations. However, one can see parallels to guild trial memberships. Like a pledge, a trialing guild member is attempting to prove their value and dedication to the guild, via showing up and participating in the activities that are expected of him/her, and by showing his overall competence with the actions he must perform in-game as a player.

Virtual worlds as a "third place"

Much of an individual's life in a MMORPG is spent interacting with other individuals in the game in some fashion. Even if a player does not speak with and chooses to avoid others online, players will undoubtedly affect his experience. The game world is not his own, but belongs to all the other players as well. As described by a number of researchers, (Book 2004, Bartle 2003) virtual worlds are a shared space, made for use by a large number of players at any given time. This is very similar to real world public gathering places, such as a coffee shop or downtown park. Researchers have given a name the hang-out location; they are called third places.

Ray Oldenburg (1997), widely considered as the person who first coined the term of the third place, explains the concept in *The Great Good Place*. Oldenburg defines a third place as a physical location, that does not involve either the home or work in any way, and whose primary purpose is to serve as a center for informal socialization. While Oldenburg was clearly referring to the real world, two virtual world researchers apply the concept to online game worlds. Steinkuehler and Williams (2004) have suggested that MMO may be an emerging form of the third place. Their primary reasoning for this is that these virtual worlds draw together large numbers of people in a space where it is possible to interact socially in an essentially anonymous environment. Quite clearly, albeit with some exceptions such as researchers and game designers, a virtual world does not revolve around either a person's occupation or domestic life. Hence, it fulfills this initial requirement of Oldenburg's. Additionally, the anonymity of a

virtual world also contributes to an informal atmosphere, in which an individual may be more likely to fraternize with other people online, given that their real-life identity is secret, provided they choose not to divulge such information. There exists a minor caveat here: the fact that character names are not anonymous. While no other players may know a given individual's real identity, people do remember the words and actions of a specific character they encounter in game. Hence, in a fashion, the idea of the anonymity disappears. However, this is but a trifle, as certainly in real world third places one's identity is generally known by others.

While defining virtual worlds on a whole new age third places, looking at guilds in particular as their own individual third places clouds the waters significantly. Much of this is due to the mass variety among individual guilds in terms of structure. From the responses in my study alone I encountered at least four different guild archetypes and many more certainly exist. Perhaps the primary issues are that of informality and accessibility. A good third place should contain both such aspects according to Oldenburg. Anyone who has had some experience with a MMORPG is well aware of the fact that many guilds are not accessible to the average player. Strict recruitment policies meant to help the guild meet its goals, such as this one (<http://noquarterguild.org/recruitment.php>) for the guild No Quarter are quite common-place in virtual worlds. One could argue that this defies the concept of a third place in that it is inaccessible to the majority of players. However, before doing so, it should be noted that real life third places are not necessarily accessible either. For an example, in many areas of the United States one must be over the age of 21 just to enter a bar. This certainly excludes the entire teenage population, at least in theory, from entering these third places. Hence, specific real world third places are not always accessible to everyone who desires to be a part of them.

Informality is also relative and varies among guilds. By their very nature, guilds have to maintain at least a minimal structure; they all must have at least one person in charge. Numerous rules are often imposed on guild members regarding what they can do and say in-game, guild chat. Such codes of behavior are expected to be adhered to, and if a guild member consistently violates policy, it is quite likely they will be removed from the guild by the leader(s). But yet again, similar codes apply to real world third places as well. A patron in a coffee shop can be removed from the premises for a multitude of behavioral reasons, such as harassment, violence, inappropriate appearance, and so on. This part of the third place concept is additionally difficult to analyze, due to the ambiguity of the term "informal." What one individual may consider informal can differ vastly from another's perspective. Perhaps the most universal application is that an informal environment is one in which the residents feel comfortable. Yet guild members comfort levels within their organization can be quite different as well, including among members of the same guild. Due to the vast variety of guild types in existence, it is simply possible to definitively apply the label of informal universally to guilds. Likewise, it is essentially impossible to concretely determine if guilds in virtual worlds constitute third places.

Study Design

My primary means of recruitment was via posting on game forums as well as on a specific end-game raiding guild forum for WoW. My reasoning for this latter addition is that I wanted to make absolutely sure that at least one or two participants were from an end-game guild in which grouping with other members happens on a regular basis. The primary forum which appeared to garner the highest number of responses was the mass posting by Dr. Delwiche on the WoW general forums board. However, after emailing many of the responders from this forum in order to set up an interview only a few actually continued responding; in other words, the flake-out rate was rather high. This was much less of a problem in EQ2, in which I only got 4 responses, but three of the persons continued communicating with me concerning my project. Also, the private guild forum I posted on garnered two participants, although I have not yet been able to interview either due to time conflicts. Actually, time was an issue in quite a few cases. For example another of my participants lives in Europe, thus making scheduling an interview time which worked for both of us fairly difficult.

Unfortunately, due to difficulty in garnering additional persons for actual interviews, it ended up being necessary to make a survey online, and then provide a link to it in game forums. This actually garnered responses fairly quick: a total of ten in about two days, thus providing me with just enough participants for the project, fourteen in total. Personally, I rather would have done more interviews, but some people flaked out and quit responding to email, while a couple others simply had very busy real life schedules, and we could not find a time which would accommodate both my schedule and their own.

All of my actual interviews were conducted entirely in-game via personal chat. I found this worked very well in EQ2 due to the chat logging feature, and was a bit more of a pain in WoW as I needed to download a mod to record chat, which was fairly difficult to get working correctly. My reasoning for conducting most interviews in game is that for one, I personally can't stand AIM and most instant messaging programs, and also I believe that participants may think more about game-related questions if they are actually in the game at the time of the interview. Perhaps the most interesting interview situation I ended up with was a participant wishing to use Ventrillo (a voice chat program) to speak with me, which I was unable to accommodate as I do not have a microphone on my personal computer. In the majority of cases I simply created an alt on the participant's server, and whispered them with a message such as: "Hey, this is Chris from the MMO class at Trinity University, how are you doing tonight?"

In some cases I started out with idle chat; it sort of depended on the time constraints of the participants in regards to how informal I could make the interview. In every case, I began the meat of the interview by asking for a simple description of the participant's guild and its general purpose/goals. This was done for a couple reasons, one to get them started speaking about their guild, too determine if I was going to ask certain questions or not. Obviously it is pointless to discuss social bonds formed through learning raid content if the participant is not in a raiding guild. A couple interviews in, I figured out how to reword one particular question to make this unnecessary. Basically, one of my

questions was worded; "In your experiences participating in raid content with your guild, do you feel that you have bonded with your fellow guild members in anyway? Please explain how/why if you have." My edit was simple, really: I removed the word "raid" and exchanged it for the word "group", thus making it apply to many more situations such as small group dungeons and PvP groups, as opposed to just raid content.

In terms of how I cite the participants in the following section, I chose a bunch of character names from one of my old favorite RPG's, *Fallout 2*, and randomly assigned them to participants. Hence, each name presented in the paper is a complete pseudonym, protecting the participant's identity.

Results and Discussion

The results of my research were, as I expected, quite varied. Answers to questions sometimes differed greatly between participants, as is wont to happen in a qualitative study. However, some trends among social interaction within guilds were clearly shown, although none were observed to be by any means unanimous. Certain individual responses, however, make some very interesting points in terms of illuminating the social fabric of guilds in virtual worlds.

One of my main objectives with this study was to attempt to discern whether or not players cooperating to overcome group content forms social bonds and develops trust. All participants stated that friendships and trust was formed between guild members via group interaction, albeit many stating varying underlying causes as to how such bonds were formed. One participant had this to say:

"Yes. The act of finding and fielding a 40 man raid is daunting. Friendships and a level of trust are important so that you can be counted on to do your job appropriately all the time. Additionally there is the issue of doing 5 man raids, and knowing and trusting those who go with you." (**Sulik**)

Here the participant is clearly stating that the difficulty of finding a large group to raid with, and the necessity that all involved do their job means that trust and bonding are important for collective success. He also mentions that smaller group content has similar properties. A number of other participants specifically cite "accomplishing goals as a unit" (**Smitty**) or "killing a large boss for the first time" (**Goris**). For them, the social bonds were formed via conquering group content. Achieving goals the group had possibly been working on for an extended period of time helped cement bonds. Of course, given these dual pieces of information, one can easily see how forming social bonds within guilds is a multi-step process. Bonding must occur on some level to establish the skills and cohesion necessary to overcome group content prior to the actual success of the group, and the subsequent achievement of the collective goal held in common by guild members reinforces these bonds.

A couple of the participants mentioned having real life friendships with many of their guild members prior to playing an MMORPG together. One in

particular declared that their joint online play helped reinforce their friendship in real life.

"The higher levels of us know each other in real life, so whenever we group it only reinforces our friendship." (**Cassidy**)

While this is interesting in and of itself, one participant's story about driving across state lines to interact with members of his guild is simply remarkable.

"Yes. My roommate and I joined the guild about 8 months ago. The group is all around college and recently graduated age. Something came up on our forums about drinking. as a graduate of ***** university (a heavy party school) my roommate and I decided that we would have to go above and beyond to show additional skill other than slaying internet monsters, by driving down from Indiana to ***** to participate in a guild drinking competition with our guild master and about 5 other members." (**Myron**)

This participant and his roommate traveled a substantial distance in order to hang out with other members of their guild in a typical social setting for people of their age. To me, this is demonstrative that these particular individuals have formed very intense bonds of friendship in virtual worlds, and desired to solidify these bonds in the real world. Often times friends who only know each other in real-life will slowly fade out of contact with each other when by chance their lives take them to separate geographic regions. However, in this case quite the opposite occurs; bonds are formed between two groups of people in a virtual world as they participate together in content with their guild and socialize online with its members. After some months of doing this, the parties decided they should further cement such ties in real life. This is certainly supportive of the idea that the internet can close and sometimes even eliminate the factor of geographical distance in friendships, not to mention suggest that the depth of online relationships can be equal to those formed in the real world.

Much of the previous discussion in the last paragraph had much to do with the mixing of online and real life friendships, and the dissolution of boundaries between the two. Now I would like to discuss programs used by many individuals in conjunction with virtual worlds. These programs I am referring to are voice-chat communication applications, two popular examples of these are Ventrillo and TeamSpeak. What these programs allow players to do is speak to each other online in their real-life voices using a headset with a microphone. In other words, through such programs one can hear the person behind the in-game character. Many of the respondents to the study cited that they used a voice communication program at least some of the time while playing their game(s) of choice. A total of ten of the participants stated that they used such programs while playing at times, and another said that he personally did not, but knew of a number of his guild mates who did use the technology.

However, one long conversation I had with a participant went well beyond the scope of the rest in terms of voice chat and developing trust online. The conversation I had with this individual regarding this topic was quite lengthy, so I will describe it as opposed to directly quoting it for brevity's sake. This participant, "Hakunin," plays WoW on a PVP (player vs. player) server, and

frequently participates in an event known as Battlegrounds, in which teams of players on opposite sides of warring factions in the game are pitted against each other.

While Hakunin used Vent to talk to his guild mates, he also used it to communicate with players on the opposing team during PVP, as did his guild mates. Apparently the two sides developed such a rapport with each other that many members began switching accounts with each other to play different characters in PVP. This process involves a very high level of trust, as real life information such as credit card numbers are carried on an individual's account. I was honestly astonished upon hearing about this, as personally I couldn't fathom sharing such information with people I have never met in real life. When I asked him how they grew to trust each other, Hakunin stated "I don't know, we just do." He also cited that passwords for accounts were mutually shared between two people, to get someone's account password you had to disclose yours to them. At the time I must admit I was skeptical of how a person could establish such trust online. However, while looking at some of my other results I came to form an idea that could possibly serve to explain this situation.

From looking at my research, another way in which trust is formed among guild members tends to be through chat, both typed and spoken.

"Absolutely. I think this bonding occurs when you spend enough time with people. Also, in my experience, people are more willing to let their guard down. Guild Chat is a major factor, the constant banter. When you spend time with the same people for weeks on end, it's hard not to get to know them." (Harrold)

For Harrold, bonding didn't necessarily occur directly via the process of participating in group content, but rather from the accumulated time he spent with other guild members. After a while, in this person's experience, guild members became comfortable enough around each other that they began chatting socially. By getting to know the person behind the character, bonds were formed.

Moving back to the area of voice chat, it is entirely possible that this is exactly what occurred in the case of Hakunin. Two other participants mentioned how use of voice chat contributed to their guild.

"Yes, I have experienced social bonding, in this guild, especially with the use of *Ventrillo*, or *Teamspeak*, you hear a person(s) voice and relate to their character more easily than you would if you didn't have it." -Skeeter

"We use a voice server, *vent*, which makes things much easier, as attaching a voice to the chat is excellent for developing a group cohesion." -Sulik

The combined statements of these two participants show that chatting using your real voice adds an extra element of bonding. Essentially, they are suggesting that hearing a person's voice enables one to trust them more than simply communicating with them through typed chat. Hence, perhaps after

extended voice communication over Ventrillo, this is the reason Hakunin trusted the players of the opposing side to such a high degree.

Going even further into the socialization involved with voice chat, one of my questions also asked if participants ever chatted outside the game of such programs, or just logged into the game to chat as opposed to actually playing it. Most participants stated that they rarely if ever logged into their particular voice-chat program when not logged into their MMORPG itself, but there were a few exceptions to this rule.

"I have chatted with my guild mates when I can't play the game." (Harrold)

Also, one participant noted a feature of EQ2 that allowed chatting (non-voice) while the player was not logged into the game.

"One of the nice things about EQ2 is eq2players.com, you can log into the chat channel without being in game, I do this quite a bit, since my spouse would be mad if I was 'playing'" (Marcus)

This comment shows that Sony has recognized that players of MMORPG's sometimes communicate with one another outside of the game world, and incorporating such a feature within their game is quite clever from a marketing standpoint. Perhaps this will be included on a much more regular basis in future MMORPG's. What is also important regarding the process of players chatting outside of the game is the concept of third spaces, as informal locations for social interaction. There are certainly few formalities involved with casual voice chat, as opposed to situational in-game voice chat involving strategies. Perhaps such instances of outside chat are the definitive example of a third space online.

Despite all these positive responses, it is also important to note that not everything revolving around the social fabric of guilds is positive. Many participants stated that their particular guilds had smaller groups of players who essentially formed cliques. In fact, only three of the respondents claimed that no such cliques existed, one of these stating that their guild was simply so small (18 total members) that it wasn't even possible logistically for them. Many explanations for how cliques formed revealed quite natural origins. Three participants stated that some of these cliques were real life friends, while another explained that his guild was a merger of five smaller guilds, and many people still tend to hang out with those from their former guilds. Responses involving the negative or positive effects cliques had on their particular guild were considerably detailed and varied. Generally speaking there was a tendency towards limited negative effects, with some positive effects cited as well, namely closer bonds formed with a small number of people. However, a couple respondents reported more significant negative experiences involving cliquish behavior within their respective guilds.

"With a good number of guild members there was trust, but there was also a small group of players who directed things that I grew uncomfortable with. They formed kind of a clique. They really just seemed to group with each other, except for raids. I did group with them once some, but they seemed to wish that the other member of this group was in the party." (Tandi)

Here, the participant felt that they were a fifth wheel and really unwanted by the clique. They were just there essentially out of the necessity for another group member to be in the party. This sort of exclusion on a small level could possibly be extended players on the outside of successful guilds, who may feel excluded from certain content because they cannot find enough players with whom to group with.

Another participant cited certain situations which existed within his guild, involving both cliques and personal disputes between players.

"Sometimes things get pretty nasty, as an officer I am pulled in the middle (two players refusing to play together)." **(Chosen One)**

Here, a situation between players apparently reached such a volatile state that they would not group with each other. Obviously, this is certainly not a positive relation. Following this line of conversation, I then asked the participant what he did as an officer in order to alleviate such situations. His answer was somewhat surprising to me.

"Honestly, I just let it go most of the time unless it affects raids. I can't expect people to follow my beliefs lock-step."
(Chosen One)

Granted, it is perfectly understandable that one cannot expect a large mass of people adhere to every whim and belief of a leader, but ignoring a dispute which has the potential to cause a problem seems a bizarre strategy. However, this participant's guild is considerably successful, so perhaps this method does indeed work sometimes.

Marcus offers a fairly unique view on many subjects and in regards to dealing with cliques puts a large focus on participation of guild members. He has led or participated in a very large number of guilds across different MMORPG's. Some he readily admits have failed, and he believes through experience he has found the tools which will best insure success; communication and participation. He states this in regards as how to make a close-knit, successful guild.

"It's all about making sure everyone feels they are contributing to the event, letting them take ownership, then they will take more pride in the accomplishment. If they just show and kill something and leave then it didn't mean anything." **(Marcus)**

To this end, this participant as a guild leader does all that he can to ensure that his members participate in the work which goes into successfully completing game content. He also uses this tactic when necessary to eliminate possible problems caused by cliques which develop within his guild.

"When you see anarchy coming though you have to split the groups up, you do that by giving them responsibilities within the guild, once again letting them take ownership." **(Marcus)**

Essentially Marcus is delegating authority and responsibility to specific cliques within the guild when necessary. Thus, he is actually taking advantage of the extra closeness associated with cliques, in having their members work together to achieve goals which will in turn benefit the entire guild. Rather than let a clique cause dissention, Marcus gives the group a goal on which to focus and thus hopefully prevent in-fighting between the clique and other members.

While we are on the topic of authority, it should be noted that on occasion social relationships between guild officers and "normal" members of a guild can be different than those simply between two members of the same status. Most of my participants stated that either never or very seldom did they observe a difference, so it is certainly not the general case, but does occur. One participant who is a guild officer makes a statement to this effect.

"As an officer, I can be difficult to approach by an average member. I (and a few other officers) intentionally cultivate some of that "distance" as a measure to keep things professional."
(Goris)

The participant in this case feels that in order to maintain his position of authority it is important that he not always becomes too close with members with whom he is tasked with governing. However, he later mentions that over time this distance can often fade away with players he has known for awhile.

"As members become more comfortable with the rest of the guild, I allow my relations with that member to become more personal in nature and relate to them more and more as an equal. Between two average members of the same rank with similar game experience, it is uncommon to find them relating as anything but equals." (Goris)

While at first this officer keeps his distance from players lower in rank, he will eventually change his social interactions with a player as he and the rest of the guild become comfortable with that player.

Conclusion

Given all the information garnered from the interview and survey participants, I feel confident in claiming that social bonding and friendships occur on a frequent basis within most guilds in MMORPG's. What is much more difficult is to determine the primary factor which causes this to occur. From what I have seen in my research, it is quite clear that no one aspect of guild membership individually is responsible for all the bonding that occurs. While one individual may feel that they bond with their fellow guild mates via the guild chat channel, another may decide that the necessity of working together with other players in groups or raids is what forms bonds. More than likely, there is no single cause to any one player's personal feelings of trust and bonding. I think that in the vast majority of cases it is a summation of many different experiences with come together to form social networks.

One conclusion that I do propose is that, no matter how they are formed, the bonds and friendships between players within virtual worlds parallel those

that people experience in the real world. Much evidence has been provided in this study to this end, even though it was not one of my original goals to look into this specific concept.

The most striking data in support of this is the widespread citation of the bonding effects of voice chat use among my participants. Many claimed that it provided some sort of authenticity to conversations that typed chat simply could not communicate; it provides a personal identity behind the character. Because of this, I would argue that programs such as Ventrillo and Teamspeak contribute greatly to bonding via making real-life connections between people who meet in virtual worlds. Evidence is also present that bonds formed virtually can often exhibit just as strong ties as those originating from the real world. The instance of the participant who drove a significant number of miles to hang out and drink with his guild mates in real life is a prime example of this concept.

While I am in many ways pleased with the outcome of my research, not everything worked out quite how I had originally envisioned it. I had wished to place an emphasis on how guilds with at least fairly stringent recruitment policies facilitated bonding. Here I was drawing from personal experience, both from my real-life membership in a close-knit local Greek organization and my strikingly similar experience in many regards with my guild in WoW. However, fate simply seemed to prevent me from going far in this direction. I had tremendous difficulty finding any sort of scholarly material involving real-life closed organizations, save for diatribes against hazing, most of which I would hardly consider scholarly, but that's another story. In addition to this issue, I simply could not find in my mind the right questions to ask in terms of uncovering information on this topic. My questions involving recruitment policies of guilds simply did not pan out. However, given this is my first attempt at this sort of research, I still feel reasonably satisfied with the results.

Additionally, although this is quite obvious, the limited scope and time-frame of this study also limits the potency of the results. Gathering information about the social interaction which fourteen MMORPG players have experience in their playing days is simply too small a sample to provide a representative look at the overall populations of these virtual worlds. More time and a larger sample size are necessary to produce more definitive results.

Appendix A Sample Recruitment Message

Ok, first things first, I'm sending you the basic description of my project required to be sent to all research participants.

Hi, my name is Chris and I'm a student at Trinity University enrolled in a communications course entitled "Games for the Web (Interactive Multimedia)" The main goal of this course is to create individual studies on some aspect of virtual worlds we find interesting. The basic purpose of my study is to explore the social aspects of guilds and guild membership, and I am currently looking for participants for the study. In particular, I am looking into the social bonding that may occur as guild members participate together in conquering specific content and achieving goals they share in common. In other words, I wish to see how group dynamics may or may not form bonds of trust and friendships similar to those seen in real life.

If you are interested, you can contact me through email at guildstudy@hotmail.com, or in-game in either Everquest 2 or World of Warcraft. My character name in EQ2 is Nukacola, on the Antonia Bayle server, and on WoW it is Orlin, on the Suramar server. Any and all information you give me as a participant will remain both confidential and anonymous. Also, all participants must be 18 years of age or older for legal/ethical reasons.

The final paper and findings of the studies will be shared online at this website at the completion of the course. More details about the actual course can be found at this website: <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>.

I also need to note some changes to my personal schedule I sent out. I will only be available until 9pm U.S. Central Time at the latest on Tuesday. However, my Wednesday night has freed up and I now will be free as of 9:30pm Central time as opposed to being busy the entire night. Thursday I have a meeting at 5pm, and will be free all night after it concludes, I'm guessing this will be around 8.

In terms of the actual logistics of the interview, we can do it either in game (I'll make an alt with the name Nukacola on your server), or via anonymous instant messenger accounts. Either way is fine by me.

Please email me back sometime this week with some times that will work for you and your preferred method of interview. I can also interview you in the following two weeks as well if these times suit your schedule better. Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Chris

Appendix B Interview Questions

- About how large is your guild, and what are its primary purposes and goals?
- When participating in group content with guild members, have you ever experienced social bonding in any form?
- Do you believe that grouping consistently with other players establishes trust between them? If so, how does this occur?
- Are you a guild leader, officer, or “average” member? Have you ever noticed any differences between the relationships and/or bonds between officers and normal members than interaction between just normal members?
- Does your position of guild leader/officer ever positively or negatively affect your relationships with normal members?
- Have you ever noticed the presence of smaller groups of players within your guild that often group together, or know of cliques of players within the guild? If so, have these cliques positively or negatively affected the overall social cohesion of the guild as a whole?
- How often do you play/group with other members of your guild?
- Have you ever logged into the game simply to chat/socialize with other players, as opposed to technically “playing the game”?
- Do you use Ventrillo, Teamspeak, or any other voice chat program to communicate with other players in your guild? If so, is this communication strictly related to game mechanics, or does casual chat also occur?
- Is your primary motivation for participating in group content the loot that results, the satisfaction of working together in defeating a difficult encounter, or something else entirely?
- What does the recruiting process for prospective new members of your guild involve? What is the reasoning behind this process?

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