Trait and symptom differences between factions in online gaming: The vulnerable side of evil

Emily S. Orr *, Craig Ross, R. Robert Orr

Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada N9B 3P4

ABSTRACT

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) that requires gamers to play in one of two factions: the Horde or the Alliance. Although deemphasized in more recent versions of the game, the Horde has traditionally been considered the "evil" faction, whereas the Alliance has been considered the "good" faction. Researchers have identified differences between these two factions with respect to gameplay, although the mechanisms for these differences are unclear. The present study investigated whether faction-based differences extend to psychological traits and symptoms. The results indicated that members of the Horde obtained higher scores on measures of interpersonal dependency and three measures of problematic WoW use. Obsession with World of Warcraft was particularly salient in predicting faction membership, with higher scores on the obsession variable predicting membership to the Horde. Possible explanations for the observed differences are suggested, limitations are reviewed, and directions for future research are indicated.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has revolutionized the world of videogames by allowing gamers to cooperate and compete against one another from the comfort of their homes. One of the most popular types of online games is the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). In an MMORPG, gamers take on the role of a character in the pursuit of an end goal, usually in cooperation or competition with the characters of other gamers. These characters are referred to as avatars. One particularly popular MMPORG, which boasted more than 12 million players in 2010, is Blizzard's World of Warcraft (WoW; Blizzard Entertainment, 2010). Although researchers are beginning to investigate the factors influencing the selection of avatars and the correlations between avatar characteristics and online behavior, research has not yet investigated whether offline psychological variables differ between different types of avatars. The present study explores differences in psychological traits and symptoms of gamers who are aligned to one of the two character factions of WoW – the Horde and the Alliance.

1.1. The World of Warcraft

In order to play World of Warcraft (WoW), players must pay to activate an account. After activating an account, gamers customize an avatar, which includes choosing the faction to which they want to belong. That is, they decide whether to play as part of the Alliance or as part of the Horde. Both factions have extensive histories within the WoW universe, and the canon of WoW spans many volumes of media including novels and previous video games (WoWWiki, 2010). The contiguous storyline continues to evolve with the benefit of Blizzard's script writers, however, the back-story (or *lore*) of the Horde and the Alliance remains. The lore of the Horde notes that it was created out of the combination of several forms of evil: the betrayal of an extra-planar being; powerful black magic; and demonic energy. It subsequently became a "ravenous war machine" (WoWWiki, 2010). Conversely, the Alliance is made up of different conglomerates (or *cultures*) that are bound by their appreciation of traits such as nobility and honor (WoWWiki, 2010).

More recent versions of WoW have abandoned the focus of dichotomizing the Alliance as the "good side" and the Horde as the "bad side," and the Horde has evolved into a more peaceful faction (WoWWiki, 2010). Nonetheless, individuals who are well versed in the lore of the World of Warcraft universe will recall the violent origins of this faction. Moreover, traces of the Horde's dark roots are evident in that the races (i.e., specific sub-divisions of avatars) available to the members of this faction have names that evoke images of violence (e.g., *blood* elves) and death (e.g., *undead*).

Before entering in the WoW universe, gamers also select between two types of gameplay: Player versus player (PvP; in which avatars can engage in combat with one another); and player versus environment (PvE; gameplay in which avatars go on quests and

* Corresponding author. Address: Mental Health Services, Cape Breton Regional Hospital, 1482 George St., Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada B1P 1P3. Tel.: +1 902 567 7742; fax: +1 902 567 7926.

E-mail address: orre@uwindsor.ca (E.S. Orr).

battle computer-generated characters). Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006) reported that PvE is the more popular type of gameplay. There are no faction-based restrictions that determine gameplay status. Gamers who select to operate in a PvP mode, however, are placed in direct competition with the opposing faction in a manner that promotes violence and "killing" other avatars. Once a gamer has initially created his or her avatar, gameplay can begin.

Given the popularity of World of Warcraft, and given the different narratives of the Horde and the Alliance, some researchers have turned their attention toward exploring the differences between the two factions in this universe. In their study of WoW gameplay, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) found that twice as many players choose Alliance avatars than Horde avatars. These authors also noted, however, that Horde gamers progressed more quickly through the game. Consequently, they identified a greater proportion of high level attainment among Horde gamers relative to those who chose to play as part of the Alliance. Chen, Sun, and Hsieh (2008) found that significantly more Horde gamers indicated a preference to play in *player versus player* (PvP) status over the *player versus environment* (PvE) status. Although it is unclear as to what mechanism is responsible for these reported differences, it nonetheless reveals that there are measureable differences between gamers in the two factions. The research reviewed above demonstrates differences between gamers in the two factions with respect to gameplay; however, it seems reasonable to suggest that inter-faction differences might also extend to offline variables. The objective of the present study is to investigate potential differences in psychological traits and symptoms (i.e., offline psychological variables) between gamers in the Horde and the Alliance. We are unaware of any research that explores offline gamer characteristics within the context of their WoW factions. There is, however, some evidence that certain offline psychological factors influence the development of avatars.

1.2. Gamers and their avatars

Given that avatars are a relatively new advancement in the electronic world, it is important to understand the relationships between gamers and avatars as their digital representations. Perhaps the most common hypothesis regarding avatar development is that avatars are an extension of the gamer's self. That is, gamers are more likely to select traits and customization features that represent their perceived or ideal selves (e.g., the WoW "Mr. T Mohawk" might be selected by users that identify as "macho"). This hypothesis was first supported by Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) who found that World of Warcraft gamers created avatars that had more positive characteristics than they identified in themselves. That is, the avatars were created with characteristics more similar to the participants' ideal selves than their actual perceived selves. In an extension of this hypothesis, Bailenson, Yee, Blascovich, and Guadagno (2008) set forth a set of three principles that they argued would influence congruence between a gamer's self (or ideal self) and his or her avatar. These three principles of avatar development or customization were: form similarity (the extent to which the avatar could resemble the gamer); behavioral similarity (how closely the avatar's behavior could mimic that of the gamer); and whether the avatar was used in real-time. According to Bailenson et al. (2008), the combination of these three variables determined how representative the avatar would be of the gamer.

These researchers have identified significant relationships between offline psychological variables (i.e., perceived and ideal self) and avatar customizations, and provided a framework for understanding how these variables interact. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that there may also be relationships between offline psychological traits and symptoms and faction selection as a specific avatar customization.

1.3. Research objectives

The research objective of the present study is to investigate psychological trait and symptomatic differences of gamers who play as part of the Horde and as part of the Alliance (i.e., the two World of Warcraft factions). The present study was conducted within a larger empirical investigation and, thus, the variables explored were personality traits (i.e., depressive personality traits and avoidant personality traits) and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and problematic use of World of Warcraft. Given that there is no previous research in this area, specific hypotheses about psychological variables and potential faction-based differences could not be made.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Thirty-three participants were recruited through the psychology participant pool of a university in southwestern Ontario to participate in an online study investigating World of Warcraft (WoW) use. Participants were using the *Wrath of the Litch King* expansion pack or earlier versions of the game. They were compensated with partial course credit for their participation. The sample was 57.6% female and the mean age was 20.61 years ($SD = 2.38$). Although this proportion of female participants is not unexpected with a university-recruited sample, it likely represents an overestimation of the proportion of female World of Warcraft gamers.

All participants were active WoW players at the time of the study. Of the 32 participants who indicated the length of time of their involvement in WoW, over half (i.e., 53%) had been playing for 1 year or less, whereas 28% were reportedly WoW gamers for 3 years or longer. The average amount of time spent on World of Warcraft on a daily basis was 96.88 min ($SD = 85.60$; Minimum = 15 min, Maximum = 360 min). Participants were asked to indicate the faction membership of their primary WoW character. Thirteen individuals identified themselves as part of the Horde, 15 indicated that they belonged to the Alliance, four did not recall, and one participant did not answer this item. Participants were also asked to indicate the amount of time they spent in *player versus player* (PvP) status and in *player versus environment* (PvE) status (via seven-point scales with the anchors "*1 – Never*" and "*7 – Always*").

With respect to age, there was an unequal distribution of variance between the two factions. Accordingly, an adjusted *t*-statistic was used. Members of the Horde were significantly younger ($M = 19.23$ years, $SD = 1.01$) than the Alliance members ($M = 21.47$, $SD = 2.56$; $t(18.798) = -3.11$, $p < .01$). The distribution of men and women between the Horde (54% women) and Alliance (60% women) was equal, $\chi^2(1) = .11$, $p > .05$. There was not a significant difference between members of the Horde and the Alliance with respect to the length of time that they had been active in the World of Warcraft universe ($t(26) = .19$, $p > .05$; both groups reported mean length of membership between 1½ and 2 years). There was a significant difference between the factions with respect to the number of minutes spent playing WoW daily, where members of the Horde reported more time spent gaming ($M = 141.54$ min, $SD = 106.05$) than the members of the Alliance ($M = 71.33$ min, $SD = 55.44$), $t(17.51) = 2.15$, $p < .05$.

2.2. Materials

Participants were asked to complete an online battery of questionnaires as part of a larger study. The entire survey took approximately 60 min to complete. Included in the larger battery was: a demographics questionnaire developed by the authors; a