

# Social Play?

## A study of social interaction in temporary group formation (PUG) in World of Warcraft

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### Abstract

One of the main components and reasons for the success of the Massive Multiplayer Online Games genre (MMOG) is that these games are seen as arenas for social interaction. The focus of this paper is the phenomenon of Pick up Groups+(PUGs), a neglected aspect of online gaming. How is the social interaction structured in these temporary groups?

The results of a participant observation study reveal a low level of social interaction between PUG players. Communication is held to a minimum and dungeons completed at high speed. Even in the event of downtime, interaction is rare. What little interaction has been observed is divided into instrumental and sociable interaction. A higher level of sociable interaction was found when several players from the same guild played together in the same group. But looking at greetings and goodbyes, normally used to acknowledge an ongoing social situation, we see that the social engagement in most PUGs is low.

In summary, social interaction in PUGs, if any, is mainly instrumental, making these temporary groups unsocial game experiences; something not normally associated with group play in the MMOG genre.

### Keywords

PuG, Sociability, Social Interaction, Looking for group, World of Warcraft.

### Introduction

We play MMOGs mainly because they are social (see e.g. [1]; [2]; [3]). The saying You come for the game but stay for the players+ summarizes this attitude. Player interdependency, guild tools, instance grouping and other social engineering features of games are ways in which developers foster a social engagement with the game and force players to interact ([4]; [5]). The focus of this study is on aspects of social interaction in World of Warcraft (WoW), released in 2004 by Blizzard and currently the dominating title in the MMOG genre. More specifically we focus on the phenomenon called Pick up Groups+(PUGs). A PUG a

group of 5-25 players, is one of the basic arenas where players meet in this virtual world and join forces to take on greater challenges together than they could possibly have been able to do on their own. This is a common phenomenon and most players at all levels spend some times in these PUGs doing dungeons or raids together. When looking at group formation in MMOGs, some research has focused on the more permanent group structure of the Guild (e.g. [5]), but very little attention has been directed towards these more temporary groups. How do players interact? What happens in this gameplay? Our specific research question is: *How is the social interaction structured in these temporary groups?*

### Dungeons

Our study focuses on a specific type of PUGs in WoW, Heroic Dungeon at level 80, currently the highest level attainable for players in the game. Even though PUGs are frequent before reaching this level it has been said that level 80 is when the real game begins. At level 80 players can set the difficulty on a dungeon, or Cave+ to normal or heroic.<sup>1</sup> These dungeons require players to join into groups of 5 for completion. The heroic setting makes the dungeon more difficult but also yields greater rewards. These heroics, as they are called, are a very important feature for level 80 players, both increasing the challenges of the game and the rewards to be found; that is, items, reputation in specific groups that give access to more items, and character improvements, titles and badges that can be used to buy items.

Any player reaching level 80 will soon come in contact with these dungeons and the rewards they offer. Many play these over and over to improve their play and master the challenges. There are currently 16 different dungeons, all adjusted to level 80 players but of varying difficulty. A heroic dungeon can be actively chosen and played once a day. However, there is no limit to how many dungeons you can play in one day if you let the game decide your choice by using the random dungeon option.

### LFG

Looking for group, LFG, is the action of MMO players searching for others to play with. In WoW's world Azeroth it is used to find party members to do a dungeon or a raid

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<sup>1</sup> Raids can also be set to increasing the amount of players needed to complete it from 10 to 25.

with. This article, however, only deals with LFG aspects of dungeons and not raid groups. We will start with a short outline of the history of LFG in WoW.

#### *A brief history of LFG in WoW*

When WoW was launched in 2004 there was only a LFG chat channel available to assist players in finding others to group with. But this channel was local, meaning that only players in the same area of the game world could be reached. The designers (Blizzard) later introduced a queuing system by creating so-called "meeting stones" situated outside the dungeons. These were rarely used, however. So in patch 1.9.0 (2006-01-03) the LFG channel was made global but was restricted to major cities. With the first WoW expansion, "The Burning Crusade", released in the first quarter of 2007, a new LFG system - a special menu facilitating group building - was introduced. The meeting stones were also transformed into "summoning stones" making it possible for two players to summon the rest of the group there. The LFG channel was removed and replaced with the LFG menu, but this resulted in players using the trade channel to find groups. Due to pressure from the players, Blizzard later reintroduced the LFG channel but players only had access to it through the LFG menu. In the second expansion, Wrath of the Lich King (2008-08-13), a new option of choosing roles was introduced in the LFG menu (Tank, Healer or DpS<sup>2</sup>). In patch 3.3.0 (2009-12-08), the LFG tool was renamed "Dungeon Finder" (DF). The new DF tool introduced cross server (realm) automatic grouping according to role selection, with special rewards for using the random dungeon option; that is, letting the game choose which dungeon you end up in. For the remainder of this paper the terms LFG and DF will be used interchangeably.

The new DF tool enables players to queue for dungeons across realms, providing faster and easier grouping. Before the introduction of the Dungeon Finder gamers could only group with others from the same realm, making each realm a separate world where different norms and cultures could arise. Blizzard first introduced cross realm Player versus Player (PvP) battles with the aim of shortening waiting time, making PvP easier in low populated or unbalanced realms in terms of faction [6]. Gamers are now divided into battlegroups, where each battlegroup contains gamers from several realms. Players can via the Dungeon Finder access a menu for joining a group for a dungeon with players in their own battlegroup.

#### **Theory of Social Life**

Erving Goffman defines social contact, called an encounter, as a situation where individuals address themselves to one another and where the situation (encounter) is reciprocally acknowledged by all participants [7: 70]. Each situation is governed by social norm structures that are highly contextual and culture specific. PuGs are in Goffman's terminology encounters, where social contact is essential.

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<sup>2</sup> These are the standard roles players take in group play, each having a distinct play style. The highly armored Tanks are the ones engaging enemies. Healers heal the damage that enemies do to friendly players. A DpS (Damage per Second) does damage to enemies, thereby killing them.

Moreover, they can be seen as focused gatherings structured by a "sanctioned orderliness" [8: 19] with local rules and identities.

An encounter between two or more people often starts with a greeting and ends with a farewell. Greetings and goodbyes are what Goffman calls supportive rituals. "Taken together, greetings and farewells provide ritual brackets around a space of joint activity" [7: 79]. Greetings and farewells respectively increase and decrease access to the other person's involvement in the social contact. When we meet someone the greeting comes first and marks a period of heightened access to the other person(s). As Goffman says: "Access, after all, is one of the things that personal relationships are about. An introduction, like a greeting, is an access ceremony" [7: 79]. Greetings vary in intensity and appropriateness depending on the situation in which they occur; greetings that are appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another. The intensity of a greeting promises something about the outcome of a situation and is defined by the expectations of its participants.

#### *Norms in MMOG*

In all situations where people interact there are norms describing what we ought to do in each situation. Looking at interaction in MMOGs and the shared knowledge about acceptable behaviour in the game, the presence of a norm system at different levels, ranging from large groups (guilds) to different kinds of small groups, is clear. According to Goffman social norms are something that guides both positive and negative actions, and is supported by social sanctions [7]. When looking at norms in MMOGs, Verhagen & Johansson state that "Norms are statements about the appropriateness of an individual's act which may result in a sanction being issued by another individual or an individual belonging to a specific class of individuals." [9: 3]. In the case of an act being evaluated as a breach against a norm, there must be the possibility of using a sanction, where sanctions can be monetary,<sup>3</sup> ostracization (shunning by the group) or accumulation of bad reputation [9]. Another fact that we need to take into account is that social norms are always about observable behaviour [11]. To uphold norms means that sanctions will have a direct effect and cost for the player who does not comply with the norms.

#### **Social Gameplay**

Throughout the development of game technology and particularly since gaming moved from the arcades into the home (although most often into public spaces in the home, see [12], the question of whether playing fosters or hinders social relationships has been an unresolved issue. Gaming has been described as a bedroom culture where children sit in isolation playing games [13]. Yet in other game studies the social aspects of gaming have been highlighted and focused upon. The fact that people now increasingly play online with or against others has somewhat changed the view of games as antisocial media. Online gaming is rapidly growing and MMOGs can be considered a form of "social spaces" (see e.g. [2] where human interaction is important. The games happen in real time and are dependent on high

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<sup>3</sup> In this instance it might be loss of player controlled currencies e.g. Dragon Kill Points, see [10].

levels of trust and cooperation in order to function [14]. MMO games constitute social spaces where a group, or an individual, takes part in different adventures. Interaction between players is a basic condition for the social possibilities of these games [15]. The games have inbuilt possibilities for social interaction ([16]; [17]) and this social interaction is the key attraction for gamers to play the games [18]. When gamers ranked the reasons they played [1] 39 percent put the social aspect first. Jakobsson & Taylor argue that "the production of social networks and the circulation of social capital prove to be one of the most important aspects in EQ [EverQuest].+[4: 88].

Previous research has shown that the social aspects of gaming are indeed important, for casual as well as power gamers [19]. Many play with friends and family, persons that they know outside the game ([18]; [20]). Jansz & Marten [21] have shown that for visitors to local area network (LAN) game meetings the social aspects of the gatherings are the main attraction. Other researchers have shown that participating in online gaming can strengthen social bonds within families [22] and lead to new relationships for youths within their own peer group [23] or via the Internet [24].

Simons *et al.* [25] define two aspects of sociality in gaming: 1. Designed sociality, i.e. the social architecture/ structure of the game; 2. Played sociality, i.e. what gamers do. These two parts of sociality regulate social gameplay and are intertwined and dependent on each other. Yee [3] has looked at computer mediated communication (CMC) in EverQuest (EQ) and argues that besides CMC, designed sociality matters. EQ is a difficult game to play solo since classes are highly dependent on each other. This high dependency on other players fosters a culture of acceptance of seeking and providing assistance. The social architecture provides ways that players can help other players. Through the many crises occurring in EQ, players learn fast about the importance of trust. The social architecture of EQ is a manner of social engineering [3]. The designed sociability or social structure of the game matters for social interaction in these types of games.

## Method

Berger & Luckmann [26] once argued that we must move in society in order to understand it. In empirical studies of MMOGs this becomes very apparent, as there is nothing to observe unless the observer enter into the game. It is necessary to get close to social life to study it [27]. The game "happens" in real time with players logging in to the game and playing. A Dungeon in WoW is limited to 5 players; there is no room for outsiders to quietly observe what is happening. To study PUGs, then, our only option was to be involved in the game. Twenty-four random dungeons were played during a period of 2 weeks. The playing sessions were distributed over weekdays (12) and weekends (12) and divided over the Horde faction (6 weekends + 6 weekdays) and the Alliance faction (6 weekends + 6 weekdays), making a total of 24 dungeons played.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In total we estimate that the recordings cover around 12 hours of game time. This does not include waiting time which varied from 10 seconds to 10 minutes with an average of 4.2 minutes, making total play time almost 14 hours.

The dungeons were played with both a healer character and a DpS character on both factions. The Horde character is on the server Zenedar (PvP) in the battleground Blackout, English (18 servers, see Appendix). The Alliance character is on the server Moonglade (PvERP) in the battleground Reckoning, English (13 servers, see Table 2, Appendix). Both battlegrounds are mixed PvE and PvP, Reckoning also contains 1 RP server.

All random PUGs were filmed and then transcribed. All chat (including emotes,<sup>5</sup> say channel and party channel) was recorded using a WoW add-on called WoWScribe (all chat was text based). All data were analyzed using a program for qualitative analysis. Notes were also taken of characters played with; role, class, race, gender, server, and if any players in the same PUG were from the same guild. In the end a total of 105<sup>6</sup> players were grouped with (not counting the researcher's characters). The researcher played in total DpS 10 times and healer 14 times. A tank character was not chosen since this role often controls the pace of the dungeon run and therefore was considered to be a too demanding and leading role for the researcher. Since the focus of the research is social interaction the researchers set up some rules for their participant observation. Besides not choosing to play a tank no social interaction was initiated by the researcher but all interaction initiated by another player was participated in. Conversations necessary for the progress of the game (e.g. asking for time to regenerate resources) was not avoided, being a part of what is expected of a player and in line with the participant observation method ([28]; [29]).

## Ethics

To protect the players no actual character names are used in the paper, instead a standard naming system has been applied. This is explained below:

Example 1; **Tank.D16.A**, Tank meaning the role the player performed in the group, D16 for dungeon 16 weekend and last A standing for Alliance.

Example 2; **DPS2.D2.H\***, DPS2 standing for second damage dealer, D2 for dungeon 2, \*meaning weekday dungeon and H standing for Horde.

## Limitations

This paper only studies PUGs in WoW. Complementing studies of other games and online phenomenon are therefore called for to understand social interaction in temporary group formation.

## Results

The results show that the social interaction in PUGs can be divided into two main types; instrumental and sociable interaction. Instrumental interaction deals with strategy and achievements, e.g. asking for buffs or breaks and calling for attention when unforeseen events occur. Sociable interaction, on the other hand, deals with greetings and goodbyes, jokes, out of game discussion and discussion

<sup>5</sup> Chat describing what the player does, e.g. *Legolas laughs*.

<sup>6</sup> You will note that the number of characters is more than it should be due to leaving/replacing during the dungeon.

concerning the game but not necessary for the progression of the session. Sociability or pure sociability is defined by Simmel [30] as the play form of association; that is, interaction free of meaning or purpose. Sociable talk, according to Simmel, is the only talk that is %a legitimate end in itself+[30: 259]. Dividing interaction in this way allows us to understand how social interaction functions in these specific game sessions between players.

#### *Instrumental interaction*

What we generally saw was a low level of both instrumental and sociable interaction in the PUGs. The excerpt below displays all written interaction in one of the random dungeons.

Dungeon 22:

DpS3.D22.H: 1 sec. snus<sup>7</sup>  
DpS3.D22.H:: back  
DpS3.D22.H:: ..  
DpS3.D22.H:: lol [laugh out loud]  
DpS2.D22.H: thx for the run  
Researcher: ty [thank you] all<sup>8</sup>

First, there were no greetings when the group was formed and the fight was started without any communication. One DpS takes a short break to put in *snus* and only one thanks the others after the completion of the dungeon. The laughter of DpS3 is uttered when that player died in an enemy encounter.

What we see in PUGs is that players at the highest level %know+the game. They know their roles, what is expected of them and different dungeon strategies, etc. Having played a character to the highest possible level in the game, everyone is expected to %know the ropes+ of the game. Tactics are uttered as an exception and mostly only if the group encounters problems, e.g. dies during the encounter, or in the matter of Achievements. Achievements are awards for completing a task under special conditions in the game, giving non-combat rewards such as titles. The extract below shows a discussion about tactics regarding the completion of an achievement called %Ruby Void+in dungeon 24.

Tank.D24.H: w8 [wait]  
Tank.D24.H: we do Ruby Void plz [please]  
DpS3.D24.H: if we do, whelps are prio [priority]  
DpS3.D24.H: they die too slow  
DpS3.D24.H: so kill the whelps as they appear  
Tank.D24.H: k  
Researcher: kk

The interaction here is structured around how to attain a particular achievement and the strategies connected with it, and is a typical example of instrumental interaction in PUGs.

Speed is another aspect of the instrumentality of the interaction. A PUG is not expected to take long. In the

<sup>7</sup> A Swedish tobacco product similar to (American) moist snuff or dipping tobacco.

<sup>8</sup> Compare this interaction with: [8: 83-84]

extract below, dungeon 12, some players are urging the tank to go faster.

DpS2.D12.H\*: go  
DpS1.D12.H\*: go?  
DpS1.D12.H\*: Go  
Tank.D.12.H\*: chill  
DpS3.D12.H\*: ZzZz

Some aspects of instrumental interaction have been called %grinding+ Grinding [31] is a term for repeatedly doing the same thing again and again, e.g. killing the same enemy for game rewards. These dungeons can be repeated multiple times during a day to receive special tokens that can be used to buy new upgrades for players. The upgrades are often considered as being the %endgame+, what players do after reaching the highest level of the game. For players outside the high end raiding guilds these dungeons constitute an alternative %endgame+. The faster they go the more of them can be done.

Dungeons are completed at a rapid pace and tactics seem to be something all players are aware of. At this point WoW has traveled far in its life cycle, the current expansion of WoW is slowly reaching its expiration date, and dungeons are becoming old and worn out since they have been played many times. There is, however, a contradiction in that new dungeons introduced in patches with novel content, more rewards and challenges for players, in our data, is played no differently from any other dungeons. Sometimes even looting the dead enemies is ignored, which is a waste of time that slows the pace of the group in a specific dungeon. From our material we cannot conclude that the level of the challenge or rewards affect the interaction in the dungeons.

#### *Sociable Interaction*

Sociable interaction in the studied PUGs is scarce. In Goffman's definition of an encounter a social situation arises when two or more people address each other and all involved acknowledge this. In this process %greetings and goodbyes+ fill important ritual functions. In World of Warcraft, greetings in PUGs are by no means a certainty. In most dungeons greetings are not exchanged or only exchanged between some players as seen in the extract above. The ritual of greeting is not seen as something necessary for the completion of the dungeon.

During frenzied dungeon runs it is possible that there simply is no time to interact. There is an assumption that downtime create sociability [17]. In our data there are several examples of downtime. Most common is when a character leaves just at the start of a dungeon and the ones left have to wait for a replacement. This would seem like a good time for interacting with other players; but our data show to the contrary that these opportunities are lost, since players do not then engage in any sociable interaction, rather everyone simply waits for a new group member to appear. We also saw examples of players clearly being bored by the waiting for a replacement and jumping frantically around in circles trying to pass the time, see extract of notes from dungeon 19 below.

0:00: Dungeon starts, the tank leaves straight away. The

researcher having been randomly selected as *Group Leader* gets a preprogrammed message saying: *+A player has left your Dungeon group. Would you like to find another to finish The Occulus?+* The researcher presses *%es+* and we join a queue to get a new tank, no one says anything, one player sits down and after two minutes another also sits down.

4:10: A tank joins but leaves straight away; we join the queue again without words, one player clearly bored jumps frantically around.

4:48: A new tank joins and says *%ay+* unclear why, no one replies and we start killing enemies.

On the other hand, in dungeons where we saw a high level of sociable interaction, players knew each other beforehand or belonged to the same Guild. In dungeon 18 the researcher together with a tank joins a group of three DpS who instantly explain that they had just died and that the tank and healer had left the group as a result. The three DpS were all from the same server and Guild. During the run they engage in frequent sociable interaction also pulling the rest of the group with them, chatting and joking. The pace of the dungeon was high but all players still found the time to chat even during boss fights. Speed of play did not seem to be a hindering factor in the social encounter. Players at this level clearly know how to multitask, playing and chatting at the same time. At the end of the dungeons the three DpS ask if we (the researcher/healer and the tank) would like to join them for another run, we both accept and are randomly put in a new dungeon. At the end of this dungeon we saw a clear mark in the expressed goodbyes.

DpS2.D18.A: sleep well all :D  
DpS2.D18.A: sea ^^ [see you around]  
DpS1.D18.A: CU! [see you around]  
Researcher: bb [bye bye]  
Tank.D18.A: bye=  
DpS1.D18.A: thanks for the runs  
Tank.D18.A: thanks alot :)  
DpS3.D18.A: cya and ty all :)  
Tank.D18.A: bb! :)

The goodbyes are heartfelt thanking, not only for the dungeon but also for the company. The goodbyes match up to the level of sociable interaction in the encounter marking its end in the same way it was perceived. The phrase *%ee you around+* is also uttered although all know that it is not likely to happen due to the structure of the cross server dungeon system.

In dungeon number 10 all group members start with greetings, DpS1 and Heal are from the same server and Guild.

Tank.D10.H\*: hi  
DpS2.D10.H\*: ey  
Researcher: ello  
Heal.D10.H\*: hey  
*Researcher summons a Healthstone*  
Heal.D10.H\*: ty  
DpS1.D10.H\*: hi and ty :)

The social standard for this dungeon is set at the start, greetings acknowledges the fact that access is given to the participants and that this is a sociable situation as well as a focused gathering. During the run talking continued, one example with players joking about the death of a player in

the game.

DpS2.D10.H\*: lol  
Heal.D10.H\*: hehe  
*In quiet contemplation, you mourn the death of DpS2*  
DpS2.D10.H\*: can I wear mail on mage?  
Researcher: ;D  
Heal.D10.H\*: sorry cant save you from that :P  
DpS2.D10.H\*: and where is my pet?

The dead DpS jokes about wanting more armor and even a pet that could protect her. At the end of this dungeon we could also see *%goodbyes+* matching the level of interaction in the rest of the dungeon. When we see dungeons with sociable interaction as well as instrumental interaction players are more likely to exchange thanks and goodbyes, marking an end to the interaction period.

#### *Norms and focused gatherings*

PuGs are focused gatherings, relying on local rules and identities as well as a mutual acceptance of the situation. The situation builds on players fulfilling their roles and *%playing their part+* otherwise the game encounter could fail. It is therefore in the interest of the group to make sure that these local rules and identities are followed (Goffman, 1961). This can be seen in the following transcript from dungeon 15.

DpS1.D15.A: DK [Death Knight] was that u??  
DpS2.D15.A: ?  
Heal.D15.A: yep  
DpS1.D15.A: that ninja pulled  
Heal.D15.A: dont pull  
DpS2.D15.A: umm maby  
DpS2.D15.A: srry

Ninja is a term commonly used to describe people's in-game behavior and originally referred to persons who take items they do not need or that others have the right to. Now the term is used for many other different transgressions as well. In the example above a DpS of the class Death Knight manages to get some enemies to attack the group (pulled), which is the job of the Tank. The group corrects the DpS who apologizes for an act that clearly goes against the local rules and identities of the situation.

PUG Interaction is structured around the focus of the encounter, the common goals and definition of the situation. We never saw any debate over this, showing that gamers share expectations on these encounters.

The occurrence of social norms was largely focused around game rewards. One example is the division of rewards in dungeons as shown below in dungeon 13.

DpS1.D13.A: can i need?  
Tank.D13.A: need if you need mate  
Heal.D13.A: ye  
Researcher: y

A DpS asks if it is ok to take a reward found in the dungeon, the rest confirm the norms concerning rewards that state if a player needs an item, and the item is better than what she or he has got, then taking it is the agreed thing to do. Later, at the end of the dungeon, the same DpS wins an epic item

(an item of higher quality).

Heal.D13.A: gz warlock  
DpS1.D13.A: =P  
Tank.D13.A: yea grats DpS1 :)  
Heal.D13.A: first epic haha :D  
Tank.D13.A: sweet :)  
DpS1.D13.A: lol  
Researcher: =) gz

The other members congratulate on the win and the DpS thanks with a smile and later a laugh.

Even in small groups of players there are implicit rules, such as congratulating on a win, the ritual of greeting each other when the group is formed and giving some indication of evaluation of the cooperation when the group dissolves. These rituals, it could be argued, are the social lubricant that makes cooperation an important component of the social aspects of gaming. However, examples of such social lubricants were scarce.

Something believed by the researchers was that there would be norms against leaving during a PUG. However, we saw a large number of players leaving just at the start or in the middle of a dungeon, often just after the group died during an encounter. There were never any reasons given for leaving and no one commented on it. There seem to be no social norms regulating this. This may be due to the structure of the group with players from different servers who in all likelihood will never meet again and are not part of the same game world. A rule of conduct, norm, would have no effect outside the actual dungeon encounter. The system that used to bring them outside, the individual reputation system [19] on servers in other games, does not work here. There is no risk of getting a reputation as a quitter or that a player won't group with you again, threats that has been shown in other games or even earlier studies of WoW ([19]; [14]).

### Conclusions

We divided PUG interaction into two categories; instrumental and sociable. Instrumental interaction deals with strategies and achievements, e.g. asking for buffs or breaks and calling for attention when unforeseen events occur. Sociable interaction deals with greetings and goodbyes, jokes, out of game discussion and discussion concerning the game but not necessary for the progression of the session. The results reveal a low level of both instrumental and sociable interaction between PUG players. Communication is held to a minimum and dungeons completed at a fast pace. Even in the event of downtime sociable interaction is rare. However, cases with a high level of sociable interaction were found when several players from the same guild played together in the same group.

It is clear that investment in the sociable situation is low. Goffman states that there always is a cost associated with interpersonal relationships. These costs, concerning time, money and effort, are always involved when people decide to meet [7]. Individuals in relationships with others then develop an understanding of these costs, especially in relation to frequency and probability of encounter; will we meet again? How much time can I spare for this relationship? A relationship where the costs are deemed

high or the probability of ever meeting again is small will therefore be deemed too costly for the individual and reduce the input and effort invested in that relationship. The low investment in the social situation of PUGs might stem from this cost evaluation. PUG players come from a multitude of different independent game worlds and the system makes repeated interaction impossible. Further, players cannot create lasting relationships or add people they PUG with to their friendlist. The cost of interaction thus exceeds any potential benefit and might therefore decrease the incentives for sociable play.

Contrary to the researchers' expectations, social norms, had little impact. Few instances of either positive or negative sanctions were observed. Norms were negotiated in relation to rewards but were seldom applied to other behavior. An example of weak norms was that many players left instantly on arriving in a dungeon. This happened on numerous occasions. No explanations were given or comments made on these leavings. A norm requires a sanction to be a norm. Reputation and trust have been shown to be important in MMOGs [14]. Reputation, however, has only a local effect on the particular server where a player's characters reside, since those characters are only visible to players on that particular server. The effect of ostracizing someone and reporting that character to a ban-list or using other means of sanctioning such as blocking that character from future cooperation has limited or no effect across servers. Our assumption is that the cost of sanctioning exceeds the gain in terms of upholding social norms in this context [9].

The local rules of the focused gathering are upheld but otherwise the norm system in place is weak, calling for further studies on norms in different online spaces.

In summary, social interaction in PUGs is instrumental rather than sociable, making these temporary groups generally unsocial game experiences. This is something not normally associated with MMO group play.

### Discussion

Social interaction in Pick up Groups, as seen in this study, is mainly instrumental, something not often discussed in relation to these types of social games. The game design does not encourage sociable interaction and gives no opportunities for creating lasting relationships. World of Warcraft, as the leading title in this genre, heavily influences what many gamers and game producers expect from MMOGs. Moreover, Blizzard has the privileged position of not having to recruit new gamers for their survival; it is more than enough of an achievement to keep the players they have. If we assume that everyone playing WoW already has a functioning social network we can assume that high end unsocial game play won't deteriorate the social structure within the game.

But that social structures are fixed is a faulty assumption. We live in a social reality that is a dynamic, continuous process rather than set and unchanging [32]. The social reality of Azeroth is likewise prone to changes, perhaps even faster than other social realities; changes not only imposed by Blizzard, designed sociality, but also by gamers, played sociality. Both fluctuate over time and social norms along with them. Norms are contextual and

changeable and the same thing can be said about sanctions. How players feel about these structures and in what way this social world will develop are important things to study both from the aspect of game design and for our understanding of social interaction online in general.

The structure of social communication in group tasks has a diminished role in the context of high level players playing together. The opportunities and structures of sociable play have been left out of the fundamental design characteristic for PuGs in World of Warcraft, something that might have long lasting consequences for the social world of Azeroth.

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## Appendix

Battlegroups and servers

### Blackout (eng, EU)

Agamaggan	PvP
Aggramar	PvE
Al'Akir	PvP
Arathor	PvE
Aszune	PvE
Azjol-Nerub	PvE
Bladefist	PvP
Bloodhoof	PvE
Bloodscalp	PvP
Burning Blade	PvP
Doomhammer	PvE
Draenor	PvE
Dragonblight	PvE
Emerald Dream	PvE
Sunstrider	PvP
Twilight's Hammer	PvP
Warsong	PvP
Zenedar	PvP

### Reckoning (eng, EU)

Ahn'Qiraj	PvP
Bronzebeard	PvE
Chromaggus	PvP
Dentarg	PvP
Drak'thul	PvP
Emeriss	PvP
Executus	PvP
Khadgar	PvE
Kul Tiras	PvE
Mazrigos	PvP
Moonglade	RP
Talnivarr	PvP
Trollbane	PvP