

# Why Do Players Experience Social Anxiety in a Virtual World?

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## ABSTRACT

This poster presents preliminary results from a study on how people who self-identify as socially anxious are able to participate in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) (WoW). By now, the gameplay experience in WoW has been established to be quite social in nature (Schiano et al. 2014; Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Yee 2006), as players must co-operate with one another in pursuit of common gameplay goals. Social anxiety, defined as the disproportional fear of social evaluation (Schlenker & Leary 1982), therefore in itself explains some of the difficulties people face as they play the game. However, in some cases online interaction can alleviate this anxiety due to its qualities, such as increased anonymity and control over self-presentation, and decreased perceived social risk (Caplan 2007). Interaction can also be easier in WoW than in real life, as Martončik & Lokša (2016) have found. However, preliminary results in this study indicate that some players still experience crippling social anxiety as they try to participate in the game. This study explores why such differences emerge between online environments.

Understanding some of the challenges faced by socially anxious people in online environments can guide their design towards inclusiveness. This is valuable as the use of such applications is ever increasing in working life and education as well as in leisure activities, such as gaming here. Creating accessible games would also be beneficial in itself, as playing may increase players' social capital offline (Trepte, Reinecke & Juechems 2012) and allow them to become more comfortable using information technology in general (Bertozzi & Lee 2007). The usual beneficial qualities of online interaction outlined above may not fully apply in the environment of WoW despite its virtual nature. Preliminary findings suggest that a perception of merit-based social acceptance can be a factor, as well as stigma surrounding difficulties in social interaction.

The topic is approached using nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon 2004), which is an ethnography-informed form of discourse analysis. Similarly to ethnography, nexus analysis is based on participant observation. However, it differs from ethnography in that it is interested in the emergence and impact of social action when the language and culture leading to that action "are taken as problems to be examined rather than as premises" (Scollon & Scollon 2007, 609).

Discourse analysis in general is interested in the power structures in societies and their connection to language use. However, according to the principles of nexus analysis

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(Scollon 2001; Norris & Jones 2005), these connections cannot be fully understood by analyzing only language in the form of text or speech, as the meaning of language is ultimately based on human action. As carriers of meaning in social interaction, actions also uphold or challenge social issues. The study of the impact of discourses on social phenomena must therefore consider how those discourses become tools for social actions. The influence of four factors on these social actions is of particular interest (Scollon & Scollon 2004): the tools the game offers for interaction, the discourses present during player interaction, the players' personal histories and their mutual relationships.

In its preliminary stage the focus of the study is on identifying the social actions and actors which have an impact on how well socially anxious players can participate. This has been done through multimodal content analysis of player culture in the game and outside it. The data has been gathered over 3 months and consists of field notes on and screen captures of observations in game as well as forum discussions.

### **Keywords**

social anxiety, nexus analysis, MMORPG, player culture

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