

# **An Unwelcome Intrusion? Player Responses to Survey Research Recruitment on the *World of Warcraft* Forums**

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## **Abstract**

Internet discussion forums provide convenient opportunities to recruit survey participants, but how do the everyday users of these sites feel about these requests? Using the official forums of a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Game (*World of Warcraft*) as a site of inquiry, this article investigates interactions between researchers and potential survey participants. Drawing on player reactions to the 163 survey requests posted to the *World of Warcraft* forums between December 2010 and April 2015, this article outlines the concerns raised by forum participants (including fears of account theft and critiques of survey design) and provides evidence this particular online community is suffering from survey fatigue. After highlighting these points of tension between players and researchers, the article concludes with a set of suggested best practices for future interactions with this particular online community.

## **Author Keywords**

Online forums; Research recruitment; World of Warcraft; Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs); Survey research; Survey fatigue; Player studies

## **Introduction**

The popularity of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) provides opportunities to study social relations ranging from interpersonal interactions of dyads and small groups (Bardzell, Bardzell, Pace, & Reed, 2008; Braithwaite, 2015; Eklund & Johansson, 2010; Nardi & Harris, 2006; Yee, 2008) to social network analyses of thousands of players (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Williams et al., 2006; Williams, Contractor, Poole, Srivastava, & Cai, 2011). Alongside investigations of in-game interactions, Consalvo (2007) has argued for the inclusion of peripheral materials in the study of digital games and their surrounding communities as such sources “serve a specific role in gaming culture and for gaming capital; they instruct a player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world” (p. 22). Beyond developer-created texts (e.g. instruction manuals, advertisements) there are also vast arrays of player-created texts about particular games including artwork (Carter, 2015), calculations about the underlying mathematical mechanics of the game (Malone, 2009; Paul, 2011), third-party modifications and ‘add-ons’ to the game client (Chen, 2012; Taylor, 2006), and the

conversations that exist on message boards and forums devoted to the discussion of MMOGs and other games (Braithwaite, 2014; Brock, 2011; Paul, 2010). These investigations illustrate that players are never “just playing a game” and MMOGs are a fruitful venue to further research about interpersonal interaction via computer-mediated communication.

A variety of MMOGs are available to purchase and play but *World of Warcraft*, a fantasy themed game released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment, continues to dominate the MMOG marketplace. Because of its continued popularity even 12 years after its original release, it is perhaps unsurprising that *World of Warcraft* continues to be one of the most widely studied MMOGs, approached by researchers from a variety of disciplines, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks (Bergstrom, de Castell, & Jenson, 2011). While the players and the in-game affordances of this particular MMOG have been widely studied, interactions between players and researchers remain underexplored. *World of Warcraft*'s popularity has led to a large number of investigations about this game and its community, but not yet investigated is how *World of Warcraft* players feel about being the subject of this research. To begin to address this gap, in this article I investigate the interactions resulting from researchers attempting to recruit survey participants on the official US *World of Warcraft* forums. Through an analysis of the 163 survey recruitment posts made between December 2010 and April 2015, I argue there is a disconnect between the goals of researchers, and the community norms and expectations of *World of Warcraft* forum users which has led to hostility towards research and the onset of survey fatigue. I conclude with a set of suggested ‘best practices’ for subsequent attempts to recruit participants from this community, or other communities that have received multiple survey requests over a short period of time. Ultimately the goal of this article is highlight the need for a discussion about how survey research is currently being conducted on the *World of Warcraft* forums, and what steps can be taken to repair the fractured relationship between researchers and players.

### **The World of Warcraft Forums**

Hosted as part of the Battle.net web portal (<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/>), the official *World of Warcraft* discussion forums are a place for players to converse about the game and other related topics. Divided into nine broad categories, each containing multiple sub-categories, the forums allow for debate and discussion with players they may not typically encounter within the gameworld. Unlike the in-game client that makes it difficult to communicate across the opposing factions,<sup>1</sup> Horde and Alliance players can communicate freely on the Battle.net forums. Furthermore, the game's servers are divided according to time zone (e.g. Pacific Standard Time or Eastern Standard Time), but the asynchronous nature of discussion forums allows for conversations to span multiple days and provides opportunity for new participants to join in as the thread develops over time. Posts are public, can be read by anyone including viewers not currently logged in to a Battle.net account, and are indexed by search engines such as Google. Anyone with an active account can start a new thread or post a reply to an existing discussion. When submitting a new post or reply, users can choose which of their avatar's names will appear alongside their message. Some users have taken advantage of the fact that an active account can house 50 avatars and have created a level 1 character specifically for posting on the forums. While not completely anonymous, this does allow for some concealment of their in-game

identity/identities when posting on the forums, especially when voicing opinions that they might not want associated with their primary avatar(s).

Since its release in 2004, *World of Warcraft* has been heavily used by researchers to explore the social interactions that are facilitated by this MMOG (Warmelink & Siitonen, 2011), but these investigations primarily focus on players and/or behaviours observed within the game client. Research specifically using the official *World of Warcraft* forums has largely investigated these computer-mediated discussions to document how players have reacted to proposed or already implemented changes announced by Blizzard Entertainment. For example, Paul (2010) conducted a rhetorical analysis of posts made to the official forums and articles on the *World of Warcraft Insider* website ([www.wowinsider.com](http://www.wowinsider.com)) after the addition of a new method for obtaining powerful weapons and armor was added to the game. These posts provided a means to investigate how the community sees particular playstyles as being more legitimate than others.

The forums also play a central role in Albrechtslund's (2011) investigations of player reactions to a controversial announcement of Blizzard's plan to change how players would be publically identified. Like Paul, Albrechtslund's analysis is tightly focused, drawing on two specific threads outlining player concerns about privacy and personal information: the thread announcing that all forum users would now be identified by their real name and email address (their "Real ID"), and the second thread where Blizzard cancelled the Real ID program. A similar investigation is found in Bergstrom, Fisher and Jenson (2016), where negative player responses to Real ID on the forums was used to demonstrate player concerns about a social stigma attached to being a *World of Warcraft* player. Bergstrom et al. describe a fear of being labeled socially inept by potential employers and/or romantic partners if their *World of Warcraft* avatar became linked to their legal name or email address.

Other investigations have used specific *World of Warcraft* forum posts to illuminate the ideological beliefs held by certain members of this gaming community, especially opinions about gender and equality. Beyer's (2012) investigation found that posters who publically identified as women were consistently blamed for their own harassment because it was assumed they must be using the public display of their gender to garner attention and/or obtain free in-game items from their fellow (male) players. More recently, Braithwaite (2014) investigated threads resulting from a beta tester's requested change to a particular NPC's dialogue. In her analysis of the flagging of a NPC's problematic dialogue addressed to only female avatars and the subsequent backlash from other players, Braithwaite describes the responses of players who felt the complaint was both unwarranted and an unwelcome attack on the elements that make *World of Warcraft* an enjoyable game.

All of these studies described above collected data via a close reading of the replies to a small number of forum threads. This allows for a nuanced understanding of the positions and arguments put forward by participants in the forums via their conversation with other posters. In my own investigation I use a similar close reading method, in this case using posts and replies as a way to better understand player reactions to researchers visiting the forums to solicit survey participants.

## Motivation and Context

The investigation detailed in this article was motivated by my experiences recruiting for an online survey about how players decide which MMOGs to play (see for example Bergstrom, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). In order to reach a diverse group of participants, I sought responses from online discussion forums devoted to a variety of online games. While members of most of the communities I recruited from were amenable to participating in a survey, recruitment on the *World of Warcraft* forums was noticeably different. Specifically, I found that not only was there far less uptake among *World of Warcraft* community members than the other MMOG communities I approached, but that this was the only instance that a respondent was hostile towards my recruitment and accused me of unsolicited advertising.

As a point of comparison, recruitment from *EVE Online* (*EVE*) related communities was fairly effortless – a single post to an *EVE* community netted over 600 responses in less than 24 hours. Compared to the 600 responses from the *EVE* recruitment post, only 15 responses resulted from my recruitment attempt on the *World of Warcraft* forums. This was initially surprising because at the time I was seeking survey responses, *World of Warcraft*'s population was (and still remains) considerably larger than *EVE*'s 500,000 active accounts. I originally attributed the first observation to the eagerness of a player community that rarely attracts attention from games researchers. Compared to *World of Warcraft*, *EVE* is a much less studied game (Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013; Bergstrom et al., 2011; Paul, 2012), and so I reasoned that the overwhelming response was excitement about (perhaps for the very first time) being asked to comment about a MMOG they particular enjoyed. On the other hand, *World of Warcraft* is a much more widely studied game and therefore a researcher appearing on the forums recruiting participants is far less of a novelty.

Throughout data collection for this larger project I familiarized myself with the rules and terms of service of the site before posting recruitment messages to a forum. If the rule(s) for posting surveys were unclear I would send a private message to the moderators introducing myself, explaining the goal of my research, and asking for permission to post the survey. After I had determined that recruitment was allowed or moderators granted permission, I searched through the forum archives looking for previous research recruitment posts to better understand the norms of the particular community and tailor my own recruitment accordingly.

My search through the *World of Warcraft* forums returned hundreds of results to the queries “survey”. I had initially assumed this large search result was due to the in-game Archeology profession where players “survey” a dig site looking for fragments of an artifact that can be pieced together for in-game rewards. Upon closer inspection I was surprised at the number of *research* survey requests being made to this particular community. After reading numerous requests for survey participants and multiple examples of negative interactions between researchers and forum users, I hypothesized that perhaps the differing uptake of my own survey between the *EVE* and *World of Warcraft* communities was not about a lack of novelty, but instead explained by *World of Warcraft* forum users suffering from survey fatigue. In an effort to better understand these observations and test this hypothesis, I conducted the investigation detailed in the next section.

## Data and Methods

Making use of the site's built-in search function, I searched for research-oriented keywords to narrow down a list of potentially relevant posts. "Dissertation", "questionnaire", and "thesis" resulted in a number of posts that could be coded without the aid of natural language processing, but the final two keywords "survey" and "research" resulted in a large amount of posts unrelated to this article's investigation, as they are terms used to describe actions that a player can undertake as part of in-game professions. For example, "research" when searched alone, results in over 12,000 individual posts at the time of data collection. Therefore the modifiers "+ school", "+ class", and "+ university" were used to narrow down the query for "survey" and "research" to a sample size that could be processed without the aid of automated coding.

I read each post returned by the search function to determine if it was requesting participants to complete a survey or questionnaire. Here I looked for posts that matched at least one of the following criteria:

- Seeking participants for a research project
- Seeking participants for a thesis/dissertation
- Seeking responses to be used in a study and/or paper for academic coursework
- Seeking survey responses, but the goal/purpose of the survey was not explicitly stated

In this case I defined "research" as broadly as possible and therefore included posts ranging from seeking assistance with a high school assignment to data collection being conducted by university faculty. Additionally, as I was looking to create a dataset that was internally consistent, I limited my collection to posts that explicitly referenced data being collected via a survey in one of two ways:

- The body of the parent post contained a link to an online survey hosted elsewhere (such as Survey Monkey or a Google web form) and/or
- The parent post contained a list of questions and respondents were asked to reply to the post or email the researcher with their answers

After finalizing my criteria for inclusion and using the search queries described above, I compiled a list of titles and URLs for each parent post matching the above criteria. These URLs were then added to a web-scraper that I used to automatically create a text file consisting of the text of the original post, as well as any replies. If a URL to an off-site survey was included in the post, I visited it to determine if the survey was still active, and what (if any) informed consent protocol was being followed.

After compiling all the requests for survey participants and their resultant replies, I coded the text of each request to confirm whether or not the post was in reference to an academic study. This distinction was necessary as occasionally players will post a survey seeking responses from other players about *World of Warcraft*-specific inquiries. I also took note if the researcher provided any information about their project including their academic affiliation, degree program (high school, undergraduate, graduate, faculty-led research), as well as if they explained the purpose of the study and/or included any form of informed consent documents (ICDs). Wherever possible I read the ICD (if one was included) and the questions on the survey to get a sense of what was being

asked of participants, and if these questions matched the description of the study provided on the forums.

For the sake of clarity, for the remainder of this article I use “researcher” to refer to the forum user who posts a survey request and “player” to refer to those who respond to this request. While collecting the dataset for this investigation, I also made note of any time a player (or players) replied to the original request for participation made by the researcher. When replies were present I read the entire thread and then used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013, p. 87–96) on my second pass through the thread.

After completing an initial round of descriptive coding, I found that the player responses most frequently fell into two broader categories: concerns about account/identity theft and concerns about survey methods. This second category, concerns about survey methods, was subdivided further, as in some of these discussions about methods the researcher returned to the forum and reacted to the criticisms in a negative manner. Because of the volatile nature of some of these discussions, some of which remain linked to the researcher’s institutional affiliation and contact information, I took steps to main both players and researchers’ privacy, discussed below.

### ***Maintaining Privacy***

The Association of Internet Researchers’ most recent ethics guide notes that aggregators and web search tools now make comments on internet forums accessible to a wider audience than what might have been originally intended (Markham, Buchanan, & AOIR Ethics working committee, 2012, p. 6–7). Therefore, in this article I follow the tactics laid out by Beyer (2012) to maintain player privacy in her own investigation of women’s participation on the *World of Warcraft* forums. Beyer notes that Google’s indexing undermines a researcher’s ability to maintain the anonymity of the players who are directly quoted in a published academic article, and that there is the possibility of inadvertently compromising the privacy of forum participants. Specifically, she cautions that direct quotes, avatar names, guild names, references to specific realms, or even a date stamp can provide enough information to trace a direct quote back to a specific player. Consequently, in my own work I use aliases and avoid using direct quotes when discussing forum material to ensure anonymity of both the researchers seeking participants, and the players commenting on these requests for participants.

I also note that when collecting posts for this dataset, I discovered that deleted posts are still archived on the Battle.net server and the post’s full title and a preview of the body text are returned by a search query. While it was possible to capture deleted posts using the web-scraper mentioned above, they were excluded because the posters no longer intended their message(s) for public consumption.

### ***Limitations and Scope***

While forum moderators have requested survey recruitment should be limited to the General Discussion sub-forum, this does not necessarily mean that all researchers have followed this request. To maintain a manageable scope, this investigation was limited to posts made to the General Discussion forum located on the US Battle.net servers. Any posts made outside this specific forum were not captured by this particular study.

Unlike other popular message boards like 4chan where posts disappear from the site after a certain amount of time (Bernstein et al., 2011; Knuttila, 2011), posts to the *World of Warcraft* forums remain until they are deleted by the player or removed by a moderator. This lack of auto-deletion creates an archive of previous discussions spanning the length of time this forum has been active, but this archive was disrupted in December 2010 when Blizzard migrated the *World of Warcraft* forums from their old server to the Battle.net web portal that is currently in use. Players were given notice that this change was coming. In this notice, forum users were advised to make personal copies of any content from the old forums they wished to keep, as once the migration happened this content would no longer be accessible, hosted, or archived by Blizzard's servers. There have been attempts to preserve the pre-migration forums in their entirety, such as the archive hosted by the now defunct *Yellow Gremlin Network* (<http://wowarchive.yg.com/>) used by Albrechtlund (2011) in her investigation of the debates surrounding the announcement and subsequent canceling of the Real ID program. At the time of writing this article, there is no publically accessible, complete archive of the forums. Therefore, the discussion for the remainder of this article is limited to posts made after December 2010 and hosted on the Battle.net servers.

### **Player-Researcher Interactions on the *World of Warcraft* Forums**

Between December 2010 and April 2015 there were 163 posts seeking survey participants made in the *World of Warcraft* General Discussion forum. Very few posts explicitly identified the researcher and/or the purpose of conducting the research, instead offering vague descriptions such as it being for an assignment or a class project. Of the researchers who provided identifying information, 24 were undergraduate or college students, 25 were graduate students, and 1 researcher identified themselves as a faculty member. Only 20 survey requests contained what I considered an Informed Consent Document (ICD) that was accessible at the time I conducted my investigation. However, I note that there could have been additional ICDs that were deleted by the researcher before my data collection began. These ICDs ranged from a few sentences on the forum post stating that no personal information would be collected and/or the survey answers would maintain the participants' privacy, to detailed ICDs that included a statement that an Institutional Review Board (IRB) had approved the research

After reading through all of the survey requests and using descriptive coding to capture the themes present in the resultant discussions, I identified three major areas of tension between players and researchers. Of particular note to future researchers attempting to research on the forums is how players often voiced concerns that their account information would be stolen if they participated in the survey. Players also offered up critiques of the surveys being posted to the forums. In some cases, the researcher was receptive to these critiques and revised their study accordingly, yet a subset of researchers reacted poorly to player critiques. These tensions are discussed below.

#### ***Concerns about account theft***

While researchers may come to the forums with the best of intentions, some of the interactions I observed appear to indicate that researchers may not be familiar with the fear of having one's account hacked or stolen. As players spend considerable time investing in their *World of Warcraft* avatars (Nardi, 2010), the loss of an account can be devastating. These fears about

account theft may lead to players' reluctance to respond to recruitment requests; I outline these concerns as a way for researchers to better understand the *World of Warcraft* community and frame their initial call for survey participants in a more appropriate manner.

*World of Warcraft's* popularity has led a shadow market that relies on the use of compromised game accounts. After illicitly obtaining a user's account name and password, the account may be used for gold farming, an activity that is against the *World of Warcraft* terms of service (Feng, 2008). One way that accounts can become compromised is through clicking a link or downloading a file that contains malware, often a keylogger that can be used to record the entry of an account's username and password (Feng, 2010). An official warning is included on the Battle.net Account Safety page (<http://us.battle.net/en/security>), advising players to being wary about all possible forms of phishing. This warning provides information about the frequently used tactic of emails that have the appearance of being sent by a reputable company, but actually contains a URL used to compromise an account. If the URL is accessed it will redirect a user to a site where they are asked to enter their account information and/or contains malicious code intended infect their computer with malware (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012). In an effort to reduce the amount of phishing on the Battle.net forums via compromised URLs, links included in the body of the post are not active. If a player intends to visit a link, they have to copy and paste it into the address bar of their web browser. This adds an extra step when recruiting potential survey participants, who may not be inclined to go to the extra effort required to follow the link or may not notice the URL as it is the same colour and font as all other text in the recruitment post.

In addition to having to copy and paste a URL into their browser's address possibly leading to a lower response rate, researchers should also be aware of potential respondents mistaking a legitimate survey as a scheme to harvest account information. This hyperawareness of phishing and malware is made apparent by my observation of some players replying to a recruitment post to explicitly state that not only will they not click a link to an off-forum website, but advising all other readers to avoid doing so as well. Suspicions were frequently expressed in cases where a URL shortening service was used (such as bit.ly or tiny.url) obscuring the link's actual address. In other cases an otherwise legitimate secondary website (such as a Google hosted web form) also led to replies expressing skepticism of the survey's legitimacy, or if questions on the survey asked for identifying information which could in turn be used in attempts to guess their account password and/or security questions.

Finally, while not overtly linked to concerns about account theft, concerns were raised that particular third party survey-hosting websites (e.g. Survey Monkey) allowed researchers to log the IP address of each survey respondent. Despite this tool being intended to help researchers determine if a single person completed the survey multiple times, players were concerned about what this meant in terms of their privacy (and by extension, the security of their *World of Warcraft* account). In some cases the researcher responded to these concerns about a "suspicious URL" and edited their original post to include the questions of the survey. Players were then invited to complete the survey by writing their answers in a reply to the parent post. While is a way to prevent participants from needing to click a link to a third party site, it does also remove the anonymity afforded by using a third party site and therefore is not an ideal course of action for anticipating and responding to fears of account theft.

### ***Concerns about methods***

Some players responding to survey requests expressed concerns about the integrity of the data being collected. A common critique that I observed across multiple threads was how recruitment via the *World of Warcraft* forums will inevitably lead to a self-selected sample and/or bias among the responses creating “useless” data that lacks the rigor necessary for an academic thesis or any sort of publishable work. Beyond the surface level complaints regarding whether or not surveys are an appropriate tool of data collection, other players expressed deeper concerns about leading questions, flawed hypotheses, or clicking on a survey link that was presented on the forums being about one topic, but finding the questions were about something else entirely. In all such cases, players returned to the forums to voice their concerns to the researcher and/or warn away other players from participating. However, this is not necessarily a negative outcome for conducting survey-based research: having the opportunity to receive feedback from the population one is attempting to study can be a valuable learning opportunity, possibly resulting in a stronger research project.

Throughout my investigation about the research being conducted on the *World of Warcraft* forums, I found abundant evidence that players are aware of (and interested in) the research being conducted about this MMOG. Player knowledge became especially apparent when researchers came to the forums with a survey that seemed to be “reinventing the wheel”. For example, researchers coming to the forums seeking basic demographics are often directed to Nick Yee’s *The Daedalus Project* (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus>) as evidence this work has already been done and has been made publically available. In one such example, a student researcher posted a survey consisting of 4 multiple choice questions in an attempt to learn more about faction choice and preferred in-game activities. This post received 11 responses, all containing critiques about the quality of the questions and some including literature suggestions where this research has already been conducted. In this case the researcher returned to the thread and replied to apologize for not being thorough during their literature review and closed the survey to further responses so they could better familiarize themselves with the existing research about this MMOG community.

I note that while players offered critiques of study designs deemed to be flawed, I also observed praise for surveys that seem to be more in line with the community’s expectations of a rigorous and/or well-designed study. For example, alongside the link to their survey, a student researcher included a general description the purposes of their study in their original post, explicitly stated their university affiliation, that they had received IRB approval and would be offering up a draw for a gift certificate to compensate respondents for their time. Here, a player replied to let the researcher know they did not feel like any of the survey questions were intrusive and included a message encouraging other players to participate in this particular research project.

In a final example of this category, a researcher originally posted a series of questions about the purchase of gold and other in-game illicit activities, asking players to reply on the forums with their answers. In contrast with the example above, in this case a player suggested that by having the responses out in the open it not only compromises respondents’ privacy, but by asking for them to publically admit to participating in activities against the *World of Warcraft* terms of service it would provide Blizzard with evidence to ban their game account(s). Here the

researcher acknowledged their transgressions and returned the following day with a new survey, this time hosted on a third party site and no longer asking any potentially identifying information that could link a respondent's answers back to a specific game account.

These interactions, especially the gold-purchasing survey, serve as examples of researchers remaining open to the concerns of the community and by being receptive, likely resulted in a higher quantity (and quality) of survey responses. I now turn my attention to interactions at the opposite end of the spectrum. Specifically, I focus on a series of posts made by graduate students attempting to recruit thesis or dissertation participants. These posts are of particular note because they demonstrated particularly negative interactions between players and researchers, which may be leading to the overall feeling of survey fatigue I observed throughout this investigation.

In one volatile example, a researcher self-identifying as a PhD student posted a link to their online survey, indicating they were seeking responses for a survey about how gamers perceive themselves. Shortly after the initial advertisement for participants was posted, players began to reply to the thread with criticisms about the researcher's choice of questions and the theoretical framework of their study. The researcher returned to the thread to post a long and hostile reply. Assuming the role of expert, this researcher assumed that none of the players responding to their survey had any postgraduate training. Furthermore, the researcher indicated that critiques about their survey were unwarranted and unwelcome, as their supervisory committee had approved their methods and survey protocol. When some players who took the survey came back to the forums to ask why they were being asked intrusive questions about romantic relationships and expressing a fear of a "bait and switch" situation where the survey was actually being used to collect data about the negative effects of MMOG play, the researcher was once again evasive and stated they would not publically discuss the underlying goals of their research for fears of unduly influencing future survey responses. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in what is colloquially known as a "flame war". The researcher ultimately deleted the link to the survey from the thread. While the original survey is no longer accessible, the researcher's responses to the player critiques remain publically available on the *World of Warcraft* forums. The interaction described above was not an isolated incident. A common thread in this subset of interactions is a defensiveness on the part of the researcher, but also a larger appeal to authority – when players voiced concerns, the researcher expressed their opinion that player concerns were invalid because their thesis/dissertation committee and/or institutional IRB had approved the study.

Above I described how players were able to point researchers towards relevant literature to better situate their studies, and therefore it is shortsighted to assume that the only experts about *World of Warcraft* can be found in academia. Furthermore, the concerns and critiques discussed thus far should be taken as a reminder that despite a lack of face-to-face interaction, *World of Warcraft* forum users are human research subjects requiring the protections of an IRB. By lobbing insults and/or engaging in flame wars, it will likely result in negative responses for one's own study, but has the possibility of 'poisoning the well' for researchers who come to the forums at a later date. In the next section I turn my attention to a more longitudinal investigation to argue that the cumulative effects of multiple survey requests and/or negative interactions has led to the onset of survey fatigue in the *World of Warcraft* forum community.

## Evidence of Survey Fatigue

When the same group of people is repeatedly asked to complete surveys, there is a noticeable drop off in participation, a decline in the quality of responses, or an increased rate of survey non-completion (Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). In the dataset collected for this article there are only a few instances of a researcher posting the same survey more than once and in these cases the subsequent posts were met with criticism from players. For example, an undergraduate researcher seeking responses for a survey about what makes MMOGs attractive to their players made two posts in rapid succession. Both contained a full ICD including information about how the information would be used, how respondent privacy would be maintained, and explicitly stating how to withdraw one's consent for participation even after submitting the completed survey – something missing from many of the survey requests I found throughout this study. While their first call for participants received no reply, the second resulted in a player replying to say that the survey was off-topic and unwelcome on the forums. The researcher apologized for breaking these unwritten rules and stated they would not repost their survey again.

Rather than seeing the same avatar posting a survey multiple times, it was more common for multiple surveys posted around the same time by different unique avatars (and therefore the assumption can be made, multiple researchers). While each researcher may only post their request once, it is the *cumulative* effect that seems to be testing the patience of this player community and leading to survey fatigue.

An extreme example comes from what appears to be an entire undergraduate university class seeking survey participants for an assignment. Multiple researchers made posts seeking respondents within the same week. Each individual post indicated that they were required by their instructor to solicit survey responses from an online gaming forum as part of an undergraduate course assignment. Many of these researchers indicated they were from the same university and therefore it is reasonable to assume enrolled in the same class or tutorial section. None of the posters acknowledged that their classmates were also posting to the same forum at the same time, all making very similar requests. Most of the survey links remained active at the time of data collection, which allowed me to read the surveys years after the original recruitment post first appeared. Most of the surveys asked similar questions to one another, and the few that included text that could be understood as an ICD were cursory at best (i.e. a brief statement that respondents' personal information will not be collected). Missing information included contact information for the researcher, their instructor/supervisor, and their university's ethics review board. Also missing was any information about where and how long the data would be stored, and any specifics as to how respondent privacy would be maintained. While extreme, this serves as an example of the negative effects this can have on player sentiments about researchers participating in the *World of Warcraft* forums. As the week went on and students continued to post recruitment threads, players began to accuse the researchers of "spamming" the forums with their requests and posting increasingly hostile replies.

Further insight into how multiple survey requests are viewed by certain members of the forum community can be gleaned by looking at responses other posts made around the same time as the undergraduate research assignment described above. In one particularly hostile reply, the forum user indicated that they had emailed the researcher's university, Google, and Blizzard to report

them for spamming. However, this hostility might also be a case of mistaken identity. In this case they were replying to a post of a graduate student seeking responses for their thesis – likely not even related to the group of undergraduate who had posted their surveys for the class mentioned above. And yet, this graduate student was lumped into the same group of accused spammers. This interaction serves as a cautionary tale: it would be prudent for researchers to spend time reading the forums to be aware of the conversations that have unfolded over the previous days (or weeks). While the graduate student attempted to recruit in a manner that was respectful to the forum participants including proper informed consent and contact information as part of their post – something missing from all the other responses around this time – their own recruitment appeared doomed to fail from the start due to the actions of other researchers, rather than through any faults in their recruitment methods. Such heavy traffic by researchers on the forums likely resulted in few responses to each individual survey for this particular class, but also has had the longer lasting effect that makes it less likely for future researchers – even studies including proper ICDs – to receive a welcoming response from this particular online community.

In her investigation of the *World of Warcraft* forums, Braithwaite (2014) notes that forum threads rarely contain more than a few dozen replies (p. 707). In my own investigation, I found that while the average number of replies to survey requests was often fewer than Braithwaite's counts, a notable exception was observed: surveys that did not seem to be explicitly tied to an academic investigation seemed to have a much more positive response by the player community. In one example, players were asked if they completed actions in-game using keyboard bindings, mouse clicks, or a combination of the two. There was no indication as to whether or not this was for an academic investigation, nor was there any indication about what this data would be used for. Respondents were asked to reply to the parent post on the forums, and in total 123 players responded to the query. What is particularly interesting is that in contrast with the examples above where replies to the researchers' posts were predominantly critiques, each of these 123 replies contained a full response to the original survey. There were no complaints about methodology or assertions that the question was somehow invalid and/or being improperly investigated. And yet, these concerns were frequently levied at explicitly academic investigations. Perhaps the topic was innocuous enough to not warrant criticism, or it could be that players are particularly interested in learning more about who uses key bindings verses mouse clicks. Based on the investigations in this article, however, I suspect that this particular survey was read as a community member researching in the interest of other *World of Warcraft* players. Forum participants seemed much more willing to respond to an insider from the community, rather than an academic researcher who will likely never return to report their results with the community members who voluntarily took the time to share their knowledge.

### **Where do we go from here?**

In the above section I have outlined the ways players have responded to survey recruitment on the *World of Warcraft* forums. As a result of this investigation, it is evident this particular player community has received a large amount of attention from researchers seeking survey responses. With evidence of hostility demonstrated above, I argue that the ways game scholars (myself included) approach this community requires reframing to prevent further rifts between researchers and researched. This article should not be taken as evidence that we should no longer attempt to conduct research via the official *World of Warcraft* forums. Rather, I suggest that a re-

framing away from the goals of an individual researcher to an approach that centres how research may be of interest (or of use) to the *World of Warcraft* community may begin to repair what appears to be an increasingly strained relationship between researchers and *World of Warcraft* forum participants.

***Suggested best practices for conducting research on the World of Warcraft forums***

Given that this forum has seen such a large amount of attention from researchers and hostility was demonstrated by some players who feel the forums are too heavily frequented by survey requests, I conclude this article with suggestions of ‘best practices’ for future survey-based research on this particular MMOG’s online forum. Recognizing that not all researchers have an academic affiliation or have access to an IRB to review their data collection protocols, a variety of options are suggested. While many of the suggestions provided below may appear as ‘common knowledge’ the interactions I observed between graduate students and players indicate that these practices are not as pervasive as more experienced researchers would assume.

**Provide documentation:** As account theft is a pressing concern by both players and Blizzard alike, potential participants will likely be more trusting of a survey with a clearly identified academic affiliation. Hosting a survey on a university’s server space may ease player skepticism, but legitimacy of the survey can also be established by the inclusion of a complete and thorough ICD (even if one is not explicitly required by one’s IRB), providing contact information of the researcher(s) at their institutional address and/or contact information for an institutional ethics review board that has approved their research. Some players expressed concern about the option for some third party sites offering researchers the choice to log IP addresses, and therefore it will likely be helpful for researchers to explicitly state if IPs are *not* being logged.

**Engage potential participants in discussion and be receptive to critiques:** I observed many examples of researchers posting their survey and never returning to the forums again. By making themselves available to answer questions about their work, researchers might be able to dissuade some of the player skepticism described throughout this article. If players are distrustful and/or have critiques about the survey’s questions or goals, effort should be made to have a fruitful discussion and to avoid the outbreak of a flame war. Researchers should be well aware of the well-circulated stereotypes about gamers (Bergstrom et al., 2016; Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012) and therefore be sensitive to the possibility that questions about social status, romantic relationships, and/or antisocial/violent tendencies may lead to a less than hospitable response from the players who frequent the *World of Warcraft* forums.

**Be aware of survey fatigue:** Oversampling of this particular online community is a concern described throughout this article; researchers should be aware of how many surveys have been posted to the forums in the days (or weeks) before posting their own. The search feature will reveal how heavily trafficked the General Discussion forums have been in recent weeks and in turn can provide a rough estimate of how amenable the community will be to this latest request for survey participation.

**Clearly describe *why* you are collecting this data:** While some theoretical paradigms might argue that data will be tainted if the research hypotheses are revealed before a player completes the survey, other paradigms (e.g. feminist methodology) recognize that research is never truly

“objective”. *World of Warcraft* players are a valuable resource for the co-construction of knowledge about the community they call their virtual home and researchers who were receptive to critiques about their survey seemed to fare better than those who ignored critiques or were hostile in responses.

**Return to the community with finished results:** While many requests for survey participants were observed through the data collection for this article, I only found six instances of researchers returning to the forum to post their analysis and/or papers that resulted from their survey. I observed that surveys that appear to be deployed by current players tended to face less criticism than those with explicitly academic goals, likely in part that the survey had been deployed by researcher who was already known and trusted by other forum users. Players have demonstrated an interest in the research about their MMOG community of choice; the player community may begin to recover from survey fatigue if they are better informed of researcher results and findings. Furthermore, researchers may wish to consider making their data available to other interested parties in aggregate or anonymized form (see for example, Nick Yee’s *The Daedalus Project* (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus>) to reduce the number of surveys asking similar questions to the *World of Warcraft* player community.

**Consider alternative methods of data collection:** Data collection via survey can appear to be a one sided conversation. Throughout this article I provided examples of players offering up critiques about the surveys in part because they were able to do so via posting a public reply to the forums. This can be read as an indication that players would like to have more input into the research being conducted about their community, or would perhaps be more amenable to methods that allow for a relationship to develop between researcher and informant over time. Therefore, researchers might consider alternative methods of data collection such as interviews, participant observation, or ethnography.

### Final Thoughts

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate that the goal of this article has not been to argue for a move away from the use of *World of Warcraft* and/or its forums to study MMOGs and their players. Instead, I have shared these findings to suggest that attention may be unevenly spread between various MMOG communities. This attention may be putting unnecessary stress on *World of Warcraft* players who are being asked to stand in as representatives for MMOG players writ large. In part, my goal has been to provide evidence of survey oversampling and therefore players’ irritability with researchers is perhaps warranted. While survey-based research has led to some tensions between players and researchers, the forums have been fruitful to researchers mobilizing other methods, such as the discourse analysis of forum posts utilized by Albrechtslund (2011), Beyer (2012), Braithwaite (2014), and Paul (2010). Similarly, longitudinal investigations of the *World of Warcraft* community, such as the ethnographic work of Nardi (2010) or Chen (2012) provide rich, thick descriptions of the community with what appears to have been far less pushback than the surveys described in this article.

While game studies is a multidisciplinary field, the danger is that we remain heavily siloed, and may not be properly aware of the research being done by others in tangential fields to our own. Indeed, the review of empirical literature about social interaction within MMOGs conducted by

Warmelink and Siitonen (2011) found that research frequently “reinvents the wheel” and replicates the same sorts of studies, rather than reading across disciplinary boundaries to find complementary work. The results of the study described in this article seem to indicate that researchers continue to work in silos and do not make themselves aware of the simultaneous work being done by others. It is hoped that by sharing this investigation, future researchers will take the necessary steps to not only avoid fatiguing this community further, but begin to work in a way that is respectful and to repair the damage that continual requests seem to have done on researcher-player relationships to date.

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<sup>1</sup> In earlier iterations of the game, players could only communicate if they were on the same faction, and their avatars were located on the same server. Currently, players are able to communicate via the in-game chat client both cross-server and cross-faction if they exchange Battle.net IDs.