“We aren’t your personal research facility”: Survey Fatigue on the World of Warcraft Forums

Kelly Bergstrom
York University
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3
kelly_bergestrom@edu.yorku.ca

Keywords
World of Warcraft, survey research, survey fatigue, feminist research methods

ABSTRACT
In this paper I investigate the interactions resulting from researchers attempting to recruit survey participants on the official US World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) forums. While previous research using the World of Warcraft forums as a site of inquiry has investigated the gendered interactions between forum users (Beyer 2012), the (dis)approval of feminism among some participants (Braithwaite 2013), or the official forums as a site for voicing concerns about proposed in-game changes (Albrechtslund 2011), interactions between forum users and researchers has yet to be explored. I argue this is a significant oversight as this particular game’s forum is frequented by researchers seeking survey participants. As all posts to the World of Warcraft forums remain accessible on the site even after the original poster has long ceased to participate in the conversation, this allows for the collection of all research posts, and analysis of how community reactions to research recruitment have changed over time.

Limiting my investigation to the General Discussion forum (the message board that moderators have requested to be used for research recruitment) I used a combination of keywords including “dissertation”, “thesis”, “survey”, “questionnaire”, and “research” to find relevant posts. Each individual post returned by the search function was read to determine if it was a post made to the forums requesting research 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

Additionally, as I was looking to create a dataset that was internally consistent, I limited my collection to posts that explicitly referenced 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), or

The parent post contained a list of questions and respondents were asked to reply to the post and/or email the researcher with their answers

After determining my criteria for inclusion and using the search queries described above, a list of titles and URLs for each parent post matching the above criteria were compiled. A web-scraper was used to 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. In total, 156 posts over a three-year period matched the above criteria and each was analyzed in detail.

Of particular concern to game scholars is the number of requests made to this specific online community, and the potential for survey fatigue to set in. Studies of surveys in other settings have found diminishing returns (Porter, Whitcomb, and Weitzer 2004) and it is likely that a similar effect will be seen by researchers attempting to recruit participants on the World of Warcraft forums. Using replies as a rough proxy for engagement, a rapid succession of posts either from one researcher or single posts from multiple researchers clustered together seem to illicit diminishing returns in terms of public interactions with the original post. A more overt indicator of fatigue is the increasing number of hostile responses on more recent recruitment posts, accusing researchers of “spamming”, “scamming”, or as the title of this paper indicates, using the forums as their “personal research facility”.

Unlike other popular means of recruiting participants (such as posters on a university campus or adverts on social media) these posts provide a public opportunity for potential participants to be able to interact with researchers, asking questions about the work they are conducting, and in some cases, voice concerns and/or disapprove of the research being conducted on their player community. Throughout player comments on researchers’ posts, the primary concern was about the possibility for identity/game account theft. My findings indicate this concern is valid, as very few of the surveys included any sort of documentation or contact information for the researcher and/or academic sponsor of the study. Wherever possible I visited these surveys and found that many lacked proper informed consent documents or even a basic description about how a potential respondents’ data would be used.

While my findings indicate that survey fatigue has become firmly entrenched in this particular online forum, I point towards feminist research methods as a possible means to repair the relationship between researchers and gamers. For example, treating participants as co-constructors of knowledge rather than subjects to be analyzed may assist with repairing rapport with this particular forum community. Finally I suggest a preliminary set of best practices for future survey recruitment on online gaming forums. Ultimately the goal of this paper is to draw attention to the concerns raised by participants in a particular MMOG community that is frequently studied.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

