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## "On justification: WoW, EQ2 and Aion forums"

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### Abstract

Dedicated forums are a location of players' expression, where they showcase their tricks, etc, but also where they will express their representations of the game and confront each other about it. These confrontations are based on value systems that shape players' conceptions of well played. Our study, based on a corpus of over 750 messages from official forums of 3 popular MMORPGs, assesses the principles of justification raised by the players when they enter a conflict. Thanks to the Common Worlds of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot), we classified players' interventions and highlighted the types of arguments in these situations of disagreement. Results show that there are few correlations between the players' characteristics and the Common Worlds mobilized. However, the Common Worlds model appears relevant to highlight different conceptions of the gameplay: strategic conceptions are encountered in Domestic and Industrial worlds; tactical conceptions are most often noticed in the ...

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# On justification: WoW, EQ2 and Aion forums

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**Abstract:** Dedicated forums are a location of players' expression, where they showcase their tricks, etc, but also where they will express their representations of the game and confront each other about it. These confrontations are based on value systems that shape players' conceptions of well played. Our study, based on a corpus of over 750 messages from official forums of 3 popular MMORPGs, assesses the principles of justification raised by the players when they enter a conflict. Thanks to the *Common Worlds* of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot), we classified players' interventions and highlighted the types of arguments in these situations of disagreement. Results show that there are few correlations between the players' characteristics and the *Common Worlds* mobilized. However, the *Common Worlds* model appears relevant to highlight different conceptions of the gameplay: strategic conceptions are encountered in *Domestic* and *Industrial worlds*; tactical conceptions are most often noticed in the *Market world*. This paper also draws some methodological conclusions about this model.

## Introduction

What is “good play”? What does it mean to “play well”? How do users have to play? Are all playing styles and practices acceptable? How do players build a common activity and common cultural references when playing? Players discuss all these issues: “good play” is not only a matter of skill or technique, but also a social issue. The “good play” is not fully given by the game: it may differ for each player, and each player can look in the game for different achievements. When the game is online, a “good play” implies to agree with other players on what is needed for experiencing this good play, according to all parties. So, if players develop their experience and sociability in their playing activity, they also do around the game (e.g. in forums devoted to the game).

These forums' interactions contribute to the structuring of the gaming experience by providing criteria and references for assessing the gaming experience. They are a way for some players to take “ownership” of their game. Some standards of gaming activity are negotiated in the players' community. It is difficult to understand gaming practices if we do not know *how* these practices are discussed between players outside the game's “magic circle” itself. So the gaming experience is partially based on value systems built or shared by players. Therefore understanding these value systems and the way they are discussed by players helps to understand how the good game and the well played are defined by players. This essay focuses on a comprehensive approach of the well played through the subjacent values players invoke.

For this purpose, we studied the exchanges on the Internet forums of three Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG). This contribution presents the results of this exploratory research assessing how players negotiate the standards of their gaming activities in an interactive and dynamic process. Analysis is exclusively based on exchanges in forums (we do not directly observe any gaming activity), and focuses on the ways players argue and justify their position in the debate. These exchanges are categorized thanks to the common worlds theory (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), in order to uncover the value systems mobilized by forumers.

This research has three objectives. Firstly, we tried to understand how players argue about their gaming activities, and especially the kind of arguments they convene when they agree or disagree. Secondly, on this basis, we highlighted some patterns (or “ideal type”) of the way these players consider their gaming activity, and especially how they consider well played. Thirdly, we had a methodological objective: assessing the contribution of the theoretical framework we used to classify players' interventions

and uncover underlying dimensions of the gaming experience. It's why we consider that this research is of an exploratory nature, even though we have worked on a corpus of several hundreds of messages.

To meet these objectives, this essay has three main parts. First, we will present the theoretical framework and the methodology used for our analysis. Second, we will draw the main characteristics of the forum interactions we analyzed. In a third step, we will show how these characteristics reveal players' subjacent conceptions of the game and well played. Conclusions will discuss contributions and limitations of this approach.

## **Theoretical framework: Boltanski and Thévenot's *Common Worlds***

When we began to look at players' forums and observed exchanges, we were impressed by the diversity of arguments they mobilize to justify actions clearly taken in the game or more generally to express their views on what should or should not be done in the game. This state of affairs requires a specific theoretical approach to frame and categorize the diversity of the arguments in a comprehensive manner. So, this reminded us of the theory of Boltanski and Thévenot on justification.

Boltanski & Thévenot (1991, 2006) constructed a grammar of political bound —called *polities*— based on canonical philosophies (Bossuet, Rousseau, Hobbes, Smith, etc.). These canonical philosophies are used to define different polities each characterized by a specific way to consider what the state of worth is. Boltanski and Thévenot were especially interested in situations where parties cannot ignore each other but nevertheless seek a common good (without using extreme means, like violence for example) because these situations highlight the worth involved. In a specific polity, specific worth guarantees this common good state. For example, in the *civic polity* (that refers to Rousseau) the state of worth is that collective interest will prevail on private interest; in the *domestic polity* (La Bruyère, Tocqueville and Bossuet), the state of worth is based on respect due to family and tradition; etc.

Boltanski and Thévenot extended this theoretical polities model to study (real) situations of disagreement and critical operations to resolve conflicts (for example, in their book: conflicts in organizational and corporate literature). Each situation (or expressed position) may therefore refer to one or more of the six *Common Worlds* defined by Boltanski and Thévenot. Each *Common World* operationalizes a specific *polity* model.

- The *Inspired World* rests on the spontaneous expression of emotions, creativity and singularity.
- The *Domestic World* is based on traditional ties, kindness and good manners.
- The *World of Fame* enhances the reputation and public events.
- The *Civic World* wants to uphold the collective interests against individualism.
- The *Market World* advocates open competition and negotiation.
- Finally, the *Industrial World* considers the measurement of performance and efficiency.

For Boltanski and Thévenot, those states of worth are not attached to a specific person and are thus a favorable condition for what they call *contention*, which is a disagreement over the worth of persons, and thus questions the equitability in the way the worth was distributed in the situation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p.133). The contention and the litigious process thus lead to a test that is expected to bring the disagreement to a close by establishing a new fair distribution of the people and objects to which worth has been ascribed (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 136).

Our study considers games and games forums as a place where players negotiate videogame practices but also put representations of the game itself into words. In this context, Boltanski and Thévenot's model seems quite relevant to understand the disputes observed and the way players overcome them. We will show later in this essay that the understanding of these forums' interactions can uncover some underlying dimensions that shape the game experience, and the representations of well play(ed) that players build on it.

## **Main hypotheses**

We made several types of assumptions about the worth mobilized in players' interventions. It is reasonable to assume that the dynamics of interactions on a forum cannot be explained by a single

cause. Also, even though these assumptions guided the data processing, one of our challenges is to assess the part of each category of factors in the dynamics we observed.

Firstly, we focused on players' characteristics. Does the involvement of the player in the game influence the positions he defends in the forum, or the way he defends them? The player's "involvement" refers to his identity, his seniority and his skills in the game or in the community. This involvement is indicated by a series of game characteristics that also constitute the player's avatar in the forum (e.g. race, class). These characteristics potentially distinguish experienced players from newbies.

Secondly, we focused on the dynamics of the interactions, considering correlations between *Common Worlds* mobilized by the players and the (un)ability to reach a compromise situation. The idea is to highlight if some *Common Worlds* are more often used together (or one against the other), and to examine whether recurrent forms of compromise correspond to these cases. This question was investigated using a categorical analysis of a corpus of messages in game forums.

Thirdly, we assumed that a specific argumentation type indicates a specific way player consider their gaming experience. *Common Worlds* may reveal the position of the player with respect to its play activity, which underlies players well played conceptions.

## Corpus, Methodology and Data Processing

This research was conducted on a corpus of discussion threads extracted from European French-speaking official forums (general discussion section) of three popular MMORPGs: *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Activision), *Everquest 2* (Sony Online Entertainment) and *Aion* (NCSoft). We chose these games because they share common characteristics: they are all online role-playing games based on the progressive development of a character in a medieval-fantasy world.

For each of these three forums we recorded the last 10 threads in the year 2010 that included keywords indicating justification processes (i.e. 'because'). Thus we analyzed 30 threads containing a total of 786 messages. For each message, we recorded the identity of its author as it appeared in the forum (which is in fact the identity of the character played in the game): nickname, race, class or specialty, level in the game and guild or legion (see Figure 1A below).

We considered individual messages as our unit of analysis. This means that each post was considered as the level that helped us to understand the player's position in the thread. The thread is not meaningful in itself: it is meaningful as a dynamics of significant messages. So, data processing was quali-quantitative and centered on individual messages. The qualitative part consisted of coding each message with respect to the *Common World* it convened, the *Common World* with which it conflicted and the presence or absence of compromise (Figure 1B). If different *Common Worlds* were apparent in a single message, the message was cut into several parts and each part coded separately, so as to preserve the richness of the argument.

Players' name	Nb of posts In the forum	Character race	Character class	Character level	Guild Name
Kathiauchka	9	wow-morts-vivants(-)	mage	82	Noobs Spotted
Myrgo	3	wow-nains(+)	chasseur	85	The Shadows
Necka	25	wow-laurens(-)	paladin	85	Im just being Miley
Poupsette	34	wow-gnomes(+)	mage	85	eXistenZ
Tmille	15	wow-draeni(+)	chaman	85	eXistenZ
Menghounette	124	wow-gobelins(-)	pretre (priest)	85	Raid in Peace

Figure 1A. Coding Characters

Structure of the messages (code)	Game name	Thread subject	Number of messages in thread	Message	Common World	Contention Yes / No	Common World targeted
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Forum	Forum	Forum	Nbre de messages	Message	Monde de référence	Défini	Epreuve avec quel monde
60	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Et surtout Necka, restes avec ta petite mentalité horribles et choses toujours à la voie de la facilité, c'est tellement plus simple. John Malbow	Monde domestique	oui	Monde marchand
61	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Ne révoquez qu'il finisse d'abrutir alors que toi tu le menace directement.	Monde domestique	oui	Monde domestique
62	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Le respect ça va pas que dans un sens. Ton avis l'on se sert bien à foutre en fait.	NA	NA	NA
63	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Et suis bien d'accord avec toi, le respect c'est dans les 2 sens mais, je ne respect pas les personnes qui proposent le genre d'idée en prétendant pour ça défense que tout le monde fait pareil ailleurs donc pourquoi pas nous. "Mon voisin fait pousser de l'herbe en douce, il lui en fournis un peu et il ne va pas le dénoncer à la police. Donc je peut le faire aussi c'est pas grave." Exemple certe un peu sorti du contexte du jeu vidéo mais l'idée est là, et moi je désapprouve totalement. Hum	Monde domestique	oui	Monde marchand
64	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Hum Désolé là j'ai rien à répondre à ça.	NA	NA	NA
65	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Np	NA	NA	NA
66	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Tu peut toujours fermer les ally @ cim.	NA	NA	NA
67	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	"I pour cette strat c'est pas mal du tout ** une piece pop par toi en attaque c'est pas mal **	Monde marchand	non	Monde marchand
68	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Ban laissez nous dans 15min ! Supper de ruiner tout un système de jeu pour des pixels, super on gagne une pièce de pvp toutes les 4h, sérieusement ça fait plus plaisir que autre choses vos arrangements à deux sous, forcément quand la horde est en equilibre ça devient plus dur de reprendre un objectif pvp, comparié au jspq ou vous étiez 4 raid vs 15, L' Alliance est remplie de troums, kloookstuffed!	Monde marchand	non	Monde marchand
69	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Sa va forcément changer, ses points quand on win vont être nerf, avant même le bug des PNLs la péninsule Nord, les v2 sont dans le camp et rien ne ce passe sa continu à fight, nous on envois un spell sur un v2 qui est à 10 metre de son camp et les gardes forcé sur nous **	Monde domestique	oui	Monde marchand
70	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113	Mais c'est hors sujet là, la faille est que temps que les points win lorsqu'on attaque sort cheat pourquoi ne pas en profiter ? Le vras PVP reprendra une fois le nerf des points arriver, on est tous "gagnent" je trouve.	Monde marchand	non	Monde marchand
71	World of warcraft	Un simple arrangement.	113				

Figure 1B. Coding Characters

We had to define unambiguous indicators of occurrence for the different *Common Worlds*. This work was rather tricky due to corpus specificities (see our remarks on this point in the conclusions). Hence, the validity of this coding was checked as follows. At first, the two researchers separately coded a small sample of messages. In a second step, a validity coefficient comparing the coding of the two investigators was computed in order to identify and measure the differences in coding. The coding rules and conventions used in the subsequent analysis were specified accordingly. In a third step, each researcher conducted the coding of a part of the corpus individually. The other researcher then checked this coding, and each disputed case was discussed for final classification.

The quantitative part consisted mainly of a statistical comparison of the occurrences and the relative importance of each variable observed in the corpus according to the explicative variables we identified in our hypotheses. Our data structure allowed us to investigate each forum in detail, and to compare the three forums.

## General overview of players' interactions

### Common Worlds frequency and differences between games

Our study highlights the fact that players primarily convene the *Industry* (EQ2: 43.5%, WoW: 38%, Aion: 32.5%) and *Domestic* worlds (Aion: 27.5%, EQ2: 27.5%, WoW: 25%) in their arguments (see Figure 2). However, in the WoW's forum, the references to the *Market World* reached 23% while this figure caps at 10% in other forums. In other words, players mainly justify their position in the following ways: firstly, for efficiency; secondly by respect of convenience. Then, thirdly, when players of WoW search for a "good deal" with other players on issues they discuss, EQ2 players highlight the inspired dimension of the game (fantasy, pleasure, etc.) and Aion players argue in terms of collective action and organization. In contrast, the *World of Fame* remains anecdotic in all three games. The focus on *Industrial World* through players' discourses is reminiscent of *theorycrafting phenomenon*. According to Paul (2011), players who pursue PVE content or raiding develop and share strategies for optimizing play. This concept of *theorycraft* — inspired by statistics used in the sports competitions— shows the desire of players to maximize their odds of success by an increased understanding about the *how to play* but beyond that, it shows their need to influence the overall quality of play and the "fun" they have. This idea is also confirmed by the categories of forum subjects we made (see below).

It appears that the *Industrial World* is mobilized mainly in the case of litigation (Industrial vs. Industrial), which means that the order of subjects and objects is challenged inside a *Common World*. In contrast, the *Domestic World* arguments mostly face Market (EQ2 and WoW) or Industrial positions (Aion).

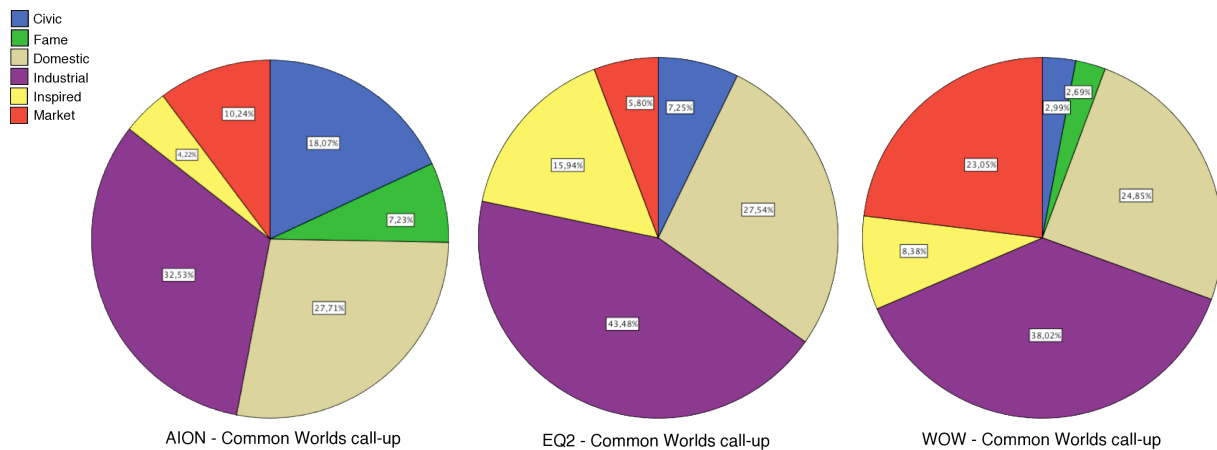


Figure 2. Common Worlds call-up

We interpret these differences in terms of the games' specificities. *Aion* and *EQ2* have a game mostly based upon *PVE* (Player versus Environment) whereas *WoW* blends *PVE* and *PVP* (Player versus Player). The competitive aspect is essential to *PVP* games. Also, it presents the need for in-game interaction with other players. Therefore it is not surprising to read subjects like: "*Priests too nerf*" (2) or "*Feral are not cheated!*" mobilizing the arguments of the *Market World*. Are each player's chances really equal? And if players think they are not, they argue for more fair rules in the game.

### Players characteristics and Common Worlds they convene

Regarding the characters' specifications, all metrics indicate that overall, neither the race nor the class nor the level seem to influence the *Common World* that is mobilized or the ability to significantly alleviate conflict. Nevertheless, this can be offset by particularities noticed in some cases and could be related to the corresponding game. For example, in *Aion's* forum debates, we found a tendency ( $p$ -value = .009) to do compromises breeds by "positive race" (Elyos) against "negative race" (Asmodians), which was not raised in other forums. But does this mean the "roleplay" has an influence in *Aion's* case? Our results do not confirm this idea. On the contrary, global results seem to show that identity "in game" does not influence position taken by the player in the argumentative process in the forums. In other words,

players value arguments from their point of view rather than from a hypothetical "troll" or "elf" Common Good's point of view.

Regarding the threads' specifications, being a prolific poster does not seem to influence the *Common World* used. However, the number of messages in a thread for the three forums appears to play a role, but in different ways depending on the forum. For *Aion*, short threads are more Domestic-related while long threads are Industrial. For *Everquest 2*, the Domestic and Industrial arguments increase with the threads' length, unlike other *Common Worlds*. Finally for *World of Warcraft*, this is more erratic except for the Market World's arguments, which increase very significantly with long threads. Then, interpreting these results globally seems to be a risky business. It does not confirm a presumed difference between experienced players (or rather "forumers") and "naive" newbies' interventions.

### Justification and things players speak about

We also performed a categorization of topics discussed in the thread we analyzed. The idea was to check if specific topics are associated with specific justification forms. This categorization identifies four kinds of discussion threads:

- Discussion about the game universe itself. For example, the races or the classes of characters, or the in-game economic system.
- Discussion considering the game as an object: its specificities, its evolution, its place regarding other games, etc.
- How to play? These threads focus on the rules, the tactics, and the procedural aspects of the *play*.
- Who to play with? This category refers to the social play, it concerns the community structuring or relationship with other players.

We noticed that the subjects discussed in *Aion* and *WoW*'s forums are more often related to the "game universe" (green - see Figure 3) and to "how to play?" (beige), whereas *EQ2* subjects mainly deal with the "game as an object" (blue). This can be explained by different reasons. Firstly, *Everquest* is a older MMORPG with a community of faithful players, so this community is relatively old compared to the others. To face competition, especially *World of Warcraft*, the publisher, SOE (Sony Online Entertainment), seeks to reach new players while maintaining their *aficionados*. This results in the migration from least active servers to North American servers, launching F2P (Free-to-play) servers, etc. It is therefore not surprising to find players' discussing the fundamentals of the game, the future evolutions they desire, etc. The second reason, corollary, is the presence of recurrent interventions from the moderator, influencing the subjects and therefore the players' position in the debates.

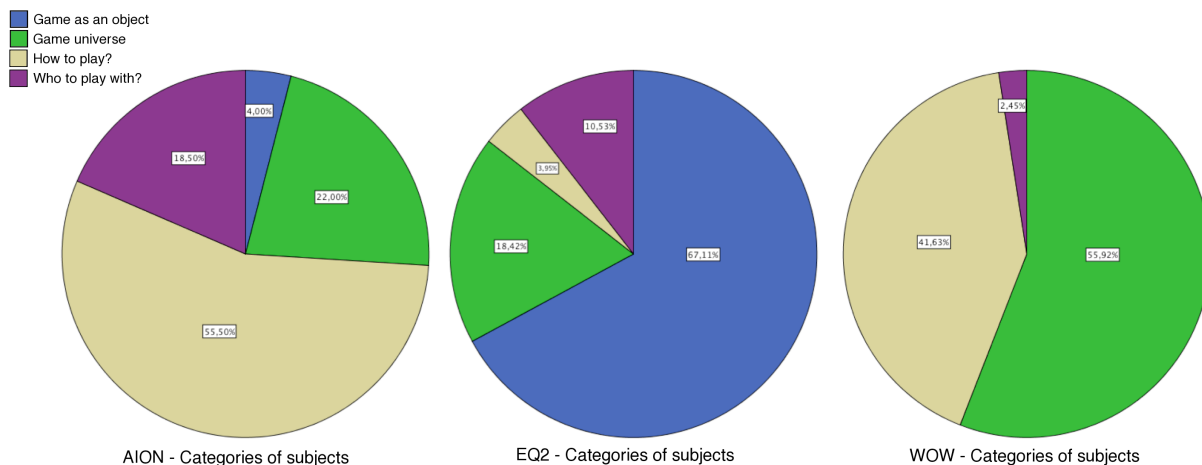


Figure 3. Subjects discussed in the three forums

## Defending the playing experience

Studying qualitatively the content of forum discussions, it is possible to uncover some representation of the gameplay often associated with precise *Common Worlds*. On these bases, we can draw different representations of what a “good play” and a “good player” are for players/forumers.

When the *Industrial world* is convened, it is usually in the context of a *strategic conception* of the game, where control and efficiency are valued. For these players, the “good player” is the one who understands the complexity of the game and is able to use several parameters with efficiency. The “good game” is running on good servers (no lag), which offers complex activities requiring a sufficient technical expertise. In this perspective, the quality of a game is mainly viewed in terms of playing experience: performance of the technical infrastructure, and performance of players that cope with this technical infrastructure. Here are some examples (3):

- **A more efficient game:** “For PvP: change the AP system as suggested in many forums, including topics well studied by Zophia ; do not allow to obtain armor with PVP bonus in PVE (...)” (Extract from the *Aion* forum; all quotations are our translation)
- **An efficient management of the team:** “(...) Now, I delete all “alts” (note: alternative characters) and demote missing players to a rank with no right. Then they remain in the guild and if their account is reactivated, they are seen in the roster.” (Extract from the *EQ2* forum)
- **An efficient way of playing:** “(...) the major concern come actually from controls. In heroic, you must force DPS to control enough mobs (note: enemies controlled by the game) to avoid having more than 2 mobs on you (1 is the ideal).” (Extract from the *WoW* forum)

The *Market World* depicts a conception of the game where competition and equality in the competition is valued. The “good player” is the one who deserves his position through collaborations with others. He is also able to bend the rules in favor of new negotiated rules considered as “more equitable”. The “good game” is open to a renewal of agreements and thus, open to a *tactical conception*.

- **A good marketplace:** “There are already price ceilings for certain essential commodities (...). But it would be ridiculous to put a cap on everything. Finally, it is doubly ridiculous bitching about the price, because inflation, as you enjoy it as well, comes to what you sell, loot or reap.” (Extract from the *Aion* forum)
- **A well-balanced environment:** “(...) what are the options for the French players? Put all of them on F2P (note: Free-to-Play) Storms (note: name of a French server) and it ends in lynching because so is not legendary stuff and then won't join a group? Or we put players on two separate servers and then, instead of having a ‘little world’ on Storms, we will have no world at all.” (Extract from the *EQ2* forum)
- **A negotiated way of playing:** “Hello to you all dear, Arak Arahm players, I would start a topic of discussion about Tol Barad. As having observed that those who attacked earned 1800 honor points, would it not be wiser to let those who attack win? It could turn Tol Barad control between two factions instead of always seeing the same having it, and this would benefit everyone in honor points because it is more sympathetic to win 1800+75+1800 than 200+200+200.” (Extract from the *WoW* forum)

The difference between a *strategic* and a *tactical* conception could be related to *The Practice of Everyday Life* from de Certeau (1990, 2011). The author distinguishes *strategies*, which are the calculus of force-relationships which become possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an ‘environment’, from *tactics*, a calculus which cannot count on ‘a proper’ —on other words means an insinuation into the other’s place (de Certeau, 2011, p. xix). An *Industrial* thought is more strategic because it looks for a stabilization (an efficient stabilization) of practices. Indeed, their messages are addressed to the game designers or to specific players who ask for advices or seem not playing properly. The *Market* thought is more tactical, which means that players seem sensitive to the constant (fair) evolution and adaptation from the game to the playing situation: how to deal with the system.

The last most used *Common World* is the *Domestic World*. Related to this world, the “good player” is the one who respects the activity and the expression of other players. The “good game” rewards properly the player regarding their experience and investment in the game.

- **An attention set to the players:** “I still remember the beginning of the game when we said RvR was unplayable :D The only answers we had (from players) were the same of ncsoft :D Mask your character details, spell effects and you can play in RvR quietly :D Benefits without making costs on servers by the end of the subscription? :)” (Extract from the Aion forum)

- **A rewarding environment:** “It’s unfortunate that loyal players who would like a nice box of SF are forced to pay double the price. SOE has a funny way of rewarding its most loyal customers... Already we pay a high price for each extension in addition to the subscription! Packs all-in-one are certainly great for new players or those who return after having missed a few episodes, but the others?” (Extract from the EQ2 forum)

- **A respectful way of playing:** “(...) who do you think you are insulting people like that. You just put your two cents in because you want easily earn honor (I like your design of PVP, guy!). And you treat me and those who are against this type of arrangement of assholes (...).” (Extract from the WoW forum)

In our analysis, we pointed out that *Domestic* arguments mostly face *Industrial* or *Market* positions. Like *Industrial* position, *Domestic* arguments look more strategic, but from a *Domestic* point of view, *Industrial* arguments are based on performance with sometimes a lack of common sense. *Example:* “You’ve packed on the horde side and now you’re crying that you have to queue. Lol anyway.” (Extract from the WoW forum). Facing *Market* arguments, the difference of conception is more relevant. As Mora (2005) observed a schism between FPS first generation players and new entrants in e-sports competitions, we consider there is a radical opposition between *Domestic* and *Market* arguments in the playing conception. From a *Domestic* point of view, advantages received from arrangements must be subordinated to merit. From a *Market* point of view, arrangements between players are valued provided that each party makes a profit. We particularly observed the violence of the “clash” with the topic “a little arrangement” in the forum of *World of Warcraft*. But unlike Mora who shows that older players are more turned toward the community (a typical *Domestic* conception) while new players would have a more utilitarian view (*Market* conception), we cannot correlate the use of these arguments at the age of the players. The main reason is that the characteristics of the avatar do not appear sufficient to discriminate real ancient and new players (4).

## Conclusions

### Justification principles and gaming experience

These results highlight certain aspects of the standards negotiation in game forums. Firstly, we did not observe monolithic arguments: different aspects are simultaneously present in the interactions, although some *Common Worlds* appear to dominate. Similarly, several types of justification are used on each topic disputed in the forums. So, to *play well* is not only a matter of efficiency, of pleasure or fairness: it is a complex phenomenon that can be discussed on several appreciation scales, and that forumers consider together in quite a complex way. Complexity arises from discussion: players are not content to express their opinion; they also come mostly to enter in a discussion (they compare their opinion with those of other).

Secondly, these results do not establish a correlation between the player’s position in the game and his arguments. On its own, the player’s position in the community does not seem to explain which *Common World* he tends to refer to. Instead, different factors, which can vary significantly from one forum to another, seem to influence the justification. We cannot consider that there are specific *Common Worlds* or justification processes among Orcs or Archers, or among older players, for example. It seems to be a disjunction between the player and the forumer, even if player’s character is also his avatar on the forum.

It is interesting to notice that these findings do not seem to be shared by players: if our metrics show no correlation between the avatars’ characteristics and his arguments, we noticed that some players think their avatar itself is an argument. For example, in a discussion thread about possible inequity of the *Paladin* class in *WoW*, a player said to another (who used different avatars): “You would have been a little more credible if you had posted with your paladin”. In this case, *being* a *Paladin* seems justify the criticisms that another class should avoid.

Thirdly, recurrent use of some *Common Worlds* indicates the existence of a clear opposition in the players’ conception of gameplay. On one hand we note a more global conception of the gameplay where the good play is appreciated in relation to the system/the community. On the other hand, some arguments

refer to a more *tactical* conception of the activity, where the good play is appreciated from individual success.

### Methodological learning

The method we developed also presented some limitations. If the Boltanski and Thévenot model provides a useful tool for quali-quantitative categorization of arguments (subject to validation steps), this application to game forums has several limitations.

A first limitation is that although the corpus is important, several messages had to be removed during the coding process because they were completely out of the debate or because they referred to in-game activities without unequivocal meaning. Thus, we faced a loss of our initial corpus between 14% (*Aion*) and 30% (*WoW*), which fortunately was not really an issue in the last case given the number of messages (see Figure 4). This corpus “cleaning” requires important interpretation work, so it is quite long and difficult to automate.

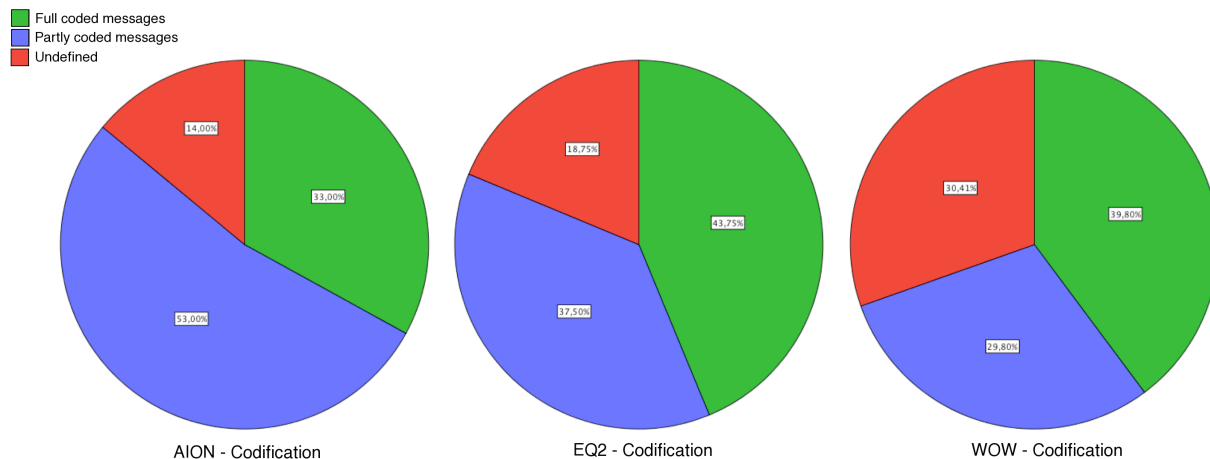


Figure 4. Loss in the coding process (in red)

A second limitation is that the MMORPG identity systems are very complex. For example, *Everquest 2* has 20 races and 25 different classes of characters, inducing issues with theoretical statistics when crossing some data. This constraint required us to combine initial data into categories. Another aspect discussed before is that some players seem to use different avatars (and so different identities) in the same discussion thread, this makes it is very difficult to map contributions to individuals unambiguously.

A last limitation is related to the nature of the corpus studied. Unlike the well-structured corporate literature examined by Boltanski and Thévenot, forum interactions appear to be quite chaotic and unstructured. There are various levels of discussion (some players speak to everyone, others answer to only one) and interventions are sometimes chaotic due to rapid writing (as highlighted in Marcochia 2003). Sometimes long threads seem to dissolve into a series of jokes performing a phatic function in the discussion, without any content suitable for analysis. In this case, there is no more argumentation and no interpretation context is available. So if the *Common Worlds* appear to be an interesting theoretical reference for identifying the way players consider their own gaming activities, implementation remains a problem.

### Further perspectives on gaming experience and players' well played conceptions

The games, especially online, are the theater of permanent compromises. But we must not forget that these compromises are necessarily concluded in a structure that is imposed to the player: the game system (Juul, 2005). Players may more or less discuss, but in the margin of the general frame given by the structure of the game. Thus, it is always interesting to evaluate various videogames' structures effects on what well played is. Nevertheless, Boltanski and Thevenot's *Common Worlds* theory shows that people defend different appreciations of an experience even when they deal with the same constraints' system. The differences thus come from the way people value things and persons. Different motivational factors may explain the involvement of the player in a game. And this is especially true for

MMORPG where players can spend several years in, so the motivations may change. The *Common Worlds* model could serve as a tool for analyzing pattern changes between players. It could also be a tool for describing the different types of player trajectories within the games. Indeed, we can assume that there are "standard trajectories" in the players' career or guilds' evolutions. A possible extension of this work would be to identify the patterns of evolution (as Fiske (1992) do about forms of sociality) of the game "playing experience", and to uncover the factors that could explain the evolution from a given *Common World* to another, that is to say from a conception of the gaming experience to another. These factors can be internal to the game system (e.a. game type), or related to the players' experiences (seniority in the game, type of achievements they intend to reach, etc.). Each step in these evolutions can be identified by specific justification principles.

## Endnotes

- (1) A lot of studies have also focused on the hierarchical and technical structures of forums, and the way they are used to retrieve information. See for example Papadakis (2004) for a bibliographical compilation of studies about IT point of view on virtual communities.
- (2) Nerf is a term that means: to be rendered ineffective or less effective by a change in the rules or the game system. The term *nerf* is based on Non-Expanding Recreational Foam, a substance used to make toy weapons. To nerf could be translated as "turn a real weapon into a toy weapon" (see <http://www.wowwiki.com/Nerf>).
- (3) Examples are from French-speaking forums and then are translated by us in English. The shaping of the dialogues has also been formatted to provide greater clarity.
- (4) Different studies suggest different representations between former and new players (see for example Mora 2005). But we have to highlight that the only "measure" of seniority is the player's level in the game: high-level player should be more ancient. But this is a questionable indicator: it is possible to build high-level character in a short space of time.

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