

What is *Audition*?

Audition is a dance battle game released in South Korea in 2004, launched in the United States in 2008, and which now attracts more than 300 million players worldwide. *Audition* is a non-violent, non-fantasy MOG, with colorful designs, cute avatars, beautiful songs, and a popular marriage system that mediates and facilitates couple-related collaborative behaviors (e.g., dance as a couple to compete with other couples). In contrast with previously studied MOGs such as *WoW*, which tend to be male dominated, *Audition* has a balanced gender distribution among its players (female: 48.6%; male: 48.1%; unknown: 3.3%. Source: Redbana.com); thus, it is an especially appropriate MOG in which to study marriage, which is overwhelmingly heterosexual, both in MOGs and in mainstream society.



Figure 1. Login screen of *Audition* (as of January 2013)

Can You Marry Me?

Conceptualizing In-game Marriage as Intimacy-mediated Collaboration

Guo Zhang

Department of Information and Library Science
School of Informatics and Computing
Indiana University Bloomington
guozhang@indiana.edu

Abstract

This study conceptualizes in-game marriage as intimacy-mediated collaboration in Multiplayer Online Games (MOGs).

Using *Audition*, a non-violent, non-fantasy dance battle MOG that mediates and facilitates couple-related collaborative behaviors, this paper investigates how collaboration and intimacy are intertwined in the game environment; it also explores three expressions of in-game marriage —*marriage as partnership*, *marriage as play*, and *marriage as commitment*.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the Owner/Author.

Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

CSCW'14 Companion, Feb 15-19 2014, Baltimore, MD, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-2541-7/14/02.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2556420.2556473>

Author Keywords

Collaboration; intimacy; in-game marriage; multiplayer online game

ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.2. User/Machine systems: Human factors

Introduction

Multiplayer Online Games (MOGs) are usually understood as collaborative virtual worlds that encompass a vast landscape of networked playgrounds. Previous research in CSCW has shed light on virtual world behavior such as task-driven and functional in-game collaboration: Players collaborate because it is imperative for success in the game, both for winning battles and for “leveling up” their avatars. Moreover, in-game collaboration is prototypically large-scale and highly organized, as illustrated by *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) guilds [8] and raiding [2]. In contrast, although intimate, affection-driven, and small-scale collaborations also occur in MOGs, including collaborations mediated via romantic relationships, they have been much less studied. One example is in-game marriage. Thus, there is a disconnection between



Figure 2. A wedding party in *Audition*



Figure 3. A love license and a ring in *Audition* (Source: <http://forums.redbana.com/>)

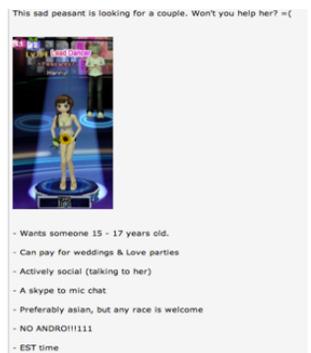


Figure 5. A female player's forum post seeking a partner. (Source: <http://forums.redbana.com/>)

studies of collaboration and studies of intimacy in the CSCW community.

With these concerns in mind, this study conceptualizes in-game marriage as intimacy-mediated collaboration. By using a non-violent, non-fantasy dance MOG (*Audition*, see Figure 1) as an example, this paper explores three expressions of in-game marriage — *marriage as partnership*, *marriage as play*, and *marriage as commitment*.

Operationalizing “collaboration” and “intimacy” in MOGs

In the context of MOG environments, this study operationalizes collaboration as *engaging in ‘play’ together, in-game and/or out-game*. Collaboration is not only a practical requirement for the success and enjoyment of playing games, but it is also a basic dynamic in the establishment, maintenance, and organization of human society. Many studies of *WoW* guilds and raiding have revealed that collaboration can provide both social support (e.g., mutual trust among multiple players) and strategic/instrumental support (e.g., knowledge gathering and sharing, player decision-making, leadership, failure) (e.g., [2,8]).

Similarly, intimacy can be operationalized as *having a mutually familiar, close, and/or affectionate connection, in-game and/or out-game*. Intimacy is not only a fulfillment of individuals' needs for knowing, loving, and caring, but it also involves self-disclosure and self-reflectivity, which are essential to people's social existence. For example, [1,3] explored the emergent practices of online intimacy in *Second Life*, as well as the related aesthetics, sexuality, self-representation, and self-identity. [7] identified four characteristics that

WoW players articulated about their virtual intimate experiences and regarded virtual world intimacy as “a part of the convergence between the increased emphasis in experience design in HCI an sociability in CSCW.” [7, p.233]

In sum, both collaboration and intimacy are essential components in the construction of MOG players' social and emotional experiences.

Conceptualizing in-game marriage

In-game marriage offered by MOGs such as *Audition* is designed based on the modern marriage model. In *Audition*, two gamers can get married through a sophisticated in-game marriage system. The married couple will go through a virtual wedding ritual (Figure 2) and receive a virtual marriage certificate (Figure 3) from the game, which is an analog of legitimated commitment in the offline world. Ideally, this official procedure is supposed to endow the married couple with more responsibilities, commitment, and a higher emotional attachment to each other, and possibly a higher loyalty to the game, which is an analog of the stability and responsibility of the intimate relationship (involving faith, trust, and care) in offline marriage.

In accordance with the operationalization of collaboration and intimacy in the previous section, in-game marriage should be conceptualized as the synergy of intimacy and collaboration in virtual worlds. In contrast to large-scale and institutional groups, in-game marriage is small-scale and involves intimacy, commitment, and/or a certain degree of passion (not just friendship). Compared with individual players who are independent of one another, in-game marriage ties



Figure 6. Couples' dance battle



Figure 7. Out-battle garden in farm (Source: <http://forums.redbana.com/>)

Confluent love and romantic love proposed by [4]:

Two types of loves (or relationships in general) in which intimacy is involved: One is Confluent love, which in general is utilitarian: an amount of love is given for the purpose of gaining the same or similar amount of love in return. The other one is romantic love. Romantic love is not constructed but an emergent and long-term emotional involvement between two people.

two players together, providing them the possibility to share experiences, feelings, and activities.

Three expressions of in-game marriage

In an exploratory research on *Audition* conducted in spring 2013 [9], three characteristics of couple-mediated collaboration (i.e., romance-driven collaboration, in-battle and out-battle collaboration, and in-game and out-game collaboration) were identified. Using the three characteristics as examples, this study explores three expressions of in-game marriage (Figure 4).

Marriage as partnership is a synergy of instrumental collaboration and confluent love [4]. Players get married in the game for utilitarian purposes, such as gaining an exclusive bonus score and using game features exclusive to couples. **Marriage as play** is a synergy of social collaboration and confluent love. Players get married in the game still for utilitarian purposes, but they emphasize the social dimension (e.g., making friends and knowing others) more than game tasks. Since confluent love, not romantic love [4], is involved, players may consider their in-game marriage as a part of the playful gaming experience. **Marriage as commitment** is a synergy of social collaboration and romantic love. Players get married in the game because they have developed (or want to develop) a disinterested emotional attachment to each other. It is also possible that players may translate such affective attachment to the offline world.

In *Audition*, seeking collaborators is often romance-driven, rather than task-driven, suggesting *marriage as play* and *marriage as commitment*. That is, players collaborate not only to win dance battles, but to

develop social experience and/or potential romantic relationships. Figure 5 shows a screenshot of a female player's forum post seeking a partner. It suggests that high sociability (being constantly online and engaging with each other) and communication (via Skype, shared language), rather than skill (e.g., levels, dancing skills, leadership, experience), are her main criteria for coupling.

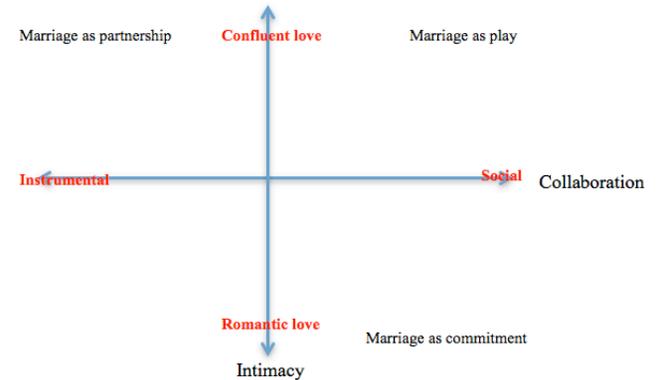


Figure 4. Three expressions of in-game marriage

Audition is designed as a dance battle game. However, couple-mediated collaboration can happen both when accomplishing game tasks (Figure 6) -- *Marriage as partnership*, and extend beyond the game's battle theme -- *Marriage as play*. Figure 7 shows an out-battle collaboration: A couple built a garden together for fun in the "couple farm," another in-game location.

In addition, the collaborations of *Audition* couples are very likely to cross the boundary between the game world and out-of-game worlds due to their emotional intensity. This is similar to what is experienced in committed real-life relationships [5]. This translation is



Figure 8. A love story (Source: <http://forums.redbana.com/>)



Figure 9. A forum signature (Source: <http://forums.redbana.com/>)

A typical story of how *Audition* couples develop their intimacy-mediated collaboration:

"Just like all of you, we don't expect to meet our someone on *Audition*. At least for us we didn't. We started off as friends during winter break of 2011 and we coupled only as friends. We are on the opposite sides of the United States so we definitely didn't want a long distance relationship. We became best friends, partners in crime, then lovers. We've had a lot of struggles as the days go by, but we still love each other." (Quote from an anonymous *Audition* couple's love story posted to <http://forums.redbana.com/>)

a sense of "reality blurred at the first login" called by [6, p. 33], and a sign of *marriage as commitment*. Some *Audition* couples post an account of their love story to the public web forum associated with the game, composed of in-game screenshots, real life photos, narratives, cartoons, and decorations. The screenshots in Figure 8 and Figure 9 show two examples of *Audition* couples' out-game romantic collaboration: a co-composed love story and a co-designed forum signature.

Contributions

This research continues the tradition of studying interpersonal dynamics forged around technological objects in digital environments. It sheds a new light on collaboration by discussing how collaboration and intimacy affect and benefit each other. For example, collaboration may naturally develop when people have intimate relationships, while intimacy may affect people's motivation to collaborate, making them more willing to collaborate.

It should be noted that the three expressions of in-game marriage are likely interchangeable and/or intertwined in the development of inter-player relationships. As such, they provide a theoretical framework for future research to analyze how in-game marriage affects MOG players' collaborative behaviors and emotional connections.

In a broader sense, this study contributes to understanding the quality of everyday life in today's digital age as regards intimate experiences. The idea of marriage as part of a playful or ludic environment can be a novel way to look at the impact of human-centered computing on interpersonal relationships.

Acknowledgements

I thank Susan Herring for her valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank Redbana.com for providing useful information.

References

- [1] Bardzell, J., & Bardzell, S. (2008). Intimate interactions: Online representation and software of the self. *Interactions*, 15(5), 11-15.
- [2] Bardzell, J., Nichols, J., Pace, T., & Bardzell, S. (2012). Come meet me at Ulduar: Progression raiding in World of Warcraft. In *Proceedings of CSCW'12* (pp. 603-612). ACM.
- [3] Bardzell, S., & Bardzell, J. (2007). Docile avatars: Aesthetics, experience, and sexual interaction in Second Life. In *Proceedings of BCS HCI' 07*(pp. 3-12). September 3-7, Lancaster, UK.
- [4] Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Love, sexuality and eroticism in modern societies*. Cambridge: Polity.
- [5] Kolotkin, R., Williams, M., Lloyd, C., & Hallford, E. (2012). Does loving an avatar threaten real life marriage? *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 5(3).
- [6] Meadows, M. (2008). *I, avatar: The culture and consequences of having a second life*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.
- [7] Pace, T., Bardzell, S., & Bardzell, J. (2010). The rogue in the lovely black dress: Intimacy in World of Warcraft. In *Proceedings of CHI' 2010* (pp. 233-242). April 10–15, Atlanta, GA. New York: ACM.
- [8] Williams, D., Ducheneaut, N., Xiong, L., Zhang, Y., Yee, N., & Nickell, E. (2006). From tree house to barracks: The social life of guilds in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture*, 1(4), 338-361.
- [9] Zhang, G., & Herring, S. C. (2013). In-game marriage and computer-mediated collaboration: An exploratory study of *Audition*. In *Proceedings of IR'14*. Oct. 23-26, Denver, CO.