BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

Social Capital Through the Lens of Virtual Reality

The impact of the WoW guilds on the individual's social capital.

A Case Study

BACHELOR THESIS

Lucia Ozaniaková   **Bratislava, January 2022**

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is the work of my own and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. All used literature is attributed and cited in the references.

In Bratislava, 31 January, 2022   Lucia Ozaniaková

Signature _____

Abstract

This study examined the influence of online multiplayer gaming spaces on individual's building of social capital. The aim was to investigate whether due to the community essence of the online World of Warcraft in-game groups of players – guilds, its members can acquire social capital benefits. Data for this research were collected by semi-structured interviews with the Czech and Slovak WoW guild members. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there are non-existent data regarding online gaming with relation to building social capital. Thus, this study filled the empty gap and brought data that future research can build on. The theoretical part focused on the explanation of social capital definitions and key concepts of reciprocity, trust, cooperation, communication, and social ties that are later applied in the analysis of WoW guilds. The empirical part discussed applications of social capital to the World of Warcraft and its guilds. Through analysis and deduction, the empirical part examined the application of social capital theory on the guilds, in the light of self-conducted interviews. Due to the guilds' communal elements, players can acquire social capital benefits including skills and social ties. Study findings suggest that by being an active member, players can build new skills, relationships and even reinforce their existing friendships. This might be interesting to examine in more depth, especially in the light of the ongoing pandemic that forces people to isolate and decrease face to face contact.

Abstrakt

Táto štúdia skúmala vplyv online herných priestorov pre viacerých hráčov na budovanie sociálneho kapitálu jednotlivca. Cieľom tejto práce bolo preskúmať či je vďaka komunitnej podstate herných online skupín — guild — vo World of Warcraft, pre jej členov možné čerpať benefity sociálneho kapitálu. Údaje pre tento výskum boli zhromaždené cez pološtruktúrované rozhovory s českými a slovenskými členmi WoW guild. V Českej republike a na Slovensku neexistujú údaje týkajúce sa online hier vo vzťahu k budovaniu sociálneho kapitálu. Štúdia, teda vypĺňa túto prázdnu medzeru a prináša údaje, od ktorých sa budú môcť odraziť ďalšie výskumy. Teoretická kapitola sa zamerala na vysvetlenie definícií sociálneho kapitálu a kľúčových pojmov vzájomnosti, dôvery, spolupráce, komunikácie a sociálnych väzieb, ktoré sa neskôr využili pri analýze guild. Empirická kapitola diskutovala o aplikáciách sociálneho kapitálu na World of Warcraft. Prostredníctvom analýzy a dedukcie, empirická časť ďalej skúmala aplikáciu teórie sociálneho kapitálu na guildy vo svetle odpovedí z uskutočnených rozhovorov. Vďaka komunálnym prvkom guild, môžu hráči profitovať zo sociálneho kapitálu vrátane sociálnych zručností a sociálnych väzieb. Výsledky tejto štúdie naznačujú, že aktívne členstvo v guildách, môže hráčom budovať nové zručnosti, vzťahy a dokonca posilniť existujúce priateľstvá. Získané dáta by bolo zaujímavé podrobnejšie preskúmať, najmä vzhľadom na prebiehajúcu pandémiu, ktorá nás núti k izolácii a znižovaniu osobného kontaktu.

Acknowledgments

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List of Abbreviations

CMC – Computer Mediated Communication

FtF – Face to Face Communication

SC - Social capital

MMO – massive multiplayer online game

MMORPG – massive multiplayer online role-playing game

RPG - role playing game

WoW – World of Warcraft

Introduction

Ever since the beginning of the human race, games have been here to accompany us in our joys and sorrows. Herodotus describes a time when during a famine in ancient times, Greeks played games every second day instead of eating, so they would entertain themselves - not think of food - and survive (Histories, 430 BC). Games are a great tool for taking us into another reality which provides respite from the trials and tribulations of the times we find ourselves in.

In times of boredom or stress, or when spending time with loved ones, people are often inclined to play games. The time we live in is technologically progressive, and hence, playing games is now most popular in the video game format. Videogames can be generally divided into solo games, where people are usually immersed in beautiful, fantastical worlds, full of new discoveries and storytelling or MMOs - massive multiplayer online games, which often have fantasy settings but are primarily based on a communal gaming experience. Well-loved type of massive multiplayer online games (referred to as MMO from this point on) are role playing games (referred to as RPGs from now on).

The most well-known MMORPG is called World of Warcraft. Its popularity has multiple reasons - the game has been played for over 20 years, it contains an enormous world and has a massive active player base. The World of Warcraft community is estimated to have as large a player base as is the population of Slovakia. That is around 5 million people playing and interacting with each other within the game. Similar to a country, World of Warcraft has many regions, races, associations, and its gamers can choose from various occupations or join in-game communities. The communities or so-called ''guilds'' are a crucial part of the online game experience. The purpose of a guild is to create a safe and cooperative place for gamers to be able to take on more difficult tasks, create trust among teammates, fight enemies they could not fight alone, meet on a set basis and communicate.

The World of Warcraft guilds mimic the actual real-life communities on several levels: they enforce cooperation, trust and reciprocity, its members fulfill various social roles,

and communicate among each other, either about guild related matters or just general chatter. Due to these parallels to real life, it will be interesting to examine what impact these online communities actually have on their members' social capital.

We can find the theoretical background to this question in the social capital theory. One of social capital's most used definitions is that it consists of social organizations such as networks, norms of reciprocity and social trust that promotes cooperation for collective achievement (Putnam, 1995). Applying this theory onto guilds – they can be considered as social organizations and their main purpose is to work for one mutual goal (e.g. fight enemies in collective combats, support prosperity of the guild). It is necessary for trust and cooperation to be reinforced in guilds, since without them, it would be nearly impossible to work for mutual goals.

As the most well-known MMORPG game, World of Warcraft was already a subject of several works of research using the context of social capital. However, as far as my research suggests, in the Slovak or Czech Republics, such research was not yet conducted. Hence, the purpose of the paper is to examine the relationships of people in virtual communities – specifically Slovak and Czech WoW guild members - through the lens of social capital theory and self-conducted, qualitative interviews. My interviews investigate the following areas of the study: how do guild members cooperate; what social bonds and level of trust exists among them; does this experience add to the establishment of reciprocity; and how does the gaming experience transfer to an individual's real life.

The creation and maintenance of the The World of Warcraft guilds is founded on the principles guided by the three major building blocks of social capital - *social reciprocity, cooperation and trust*. This paper will ultimately aim to address the following primary question: Do the guild communities in the World of Warcraft online game positively influence and contribute to the building of their members' social capital?

1. CHAPTER: Understanding the Dimensions of Social Capital

Despite decades of researching social capital, there is no consensus about the theory, instead, there are many contradicting theories that try to establish what it is. Social capital is a multidimensional theory that includes various aspects of social interactions, for instance, feelings of belonging, norms, trust, cooperation or reciprocity. Essentially, social capital refers to an individual's ability to create social ties throughout their life and benefit from them. Social ties exist across our friendship networks, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, clubs, civic associations or even bars. Possible benefits resulting from social ties include ''welfare, job opportunities, economic capital, emotional support, and health'' (Hyyppä, 2010, p. 12). Social ties are formed based on shared norms and values, cooperation, trust or mutual aid – reciprocity. Social capital refers to both the social ties of individual actors and those of an entire social group. Understanding social capital thus lies in both individual, and collective levels and in fact adds to both private, and public good (Esser, 2008).

Through the work of the most acknowledged theorists in this field - Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam - the following chapter outlines theoretical definitions and dimensions of social capital that are relevant to the key points of this study.

1.1 Definitions of Social Capital

PIERRE BOURDIEU

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote about the concept of social capital in the late 1980s, and defined it as ''the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group'' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). He understood social capital from an economic perspective and even stated that ''economic capital is the root of all other types of capital'' (Bourdieu, p. 252). For Bourdieu, social capital was more about a power structure. Individuals can benefit from their social network by gaining power, privileges, status or class from their social networks (Smith & Kulynych, 2002).

Bourdieu observed social capital as a property of an individual rather than a collective. Despite the individual level approach, he understood the importance of solidarity in social groups. ''The profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible'' (Bourdieu, p. 249). Even though, overall, he viewed the concept of social capital more through the lens of the power structure among classes, similarly to Putnam, he also emphasized a concept of solidarity – mutual help for group benefit – or as Putnam calls it, ''reciprocity''.

JAMES S. COLEMAN

A few years after Bourdieu, American sociologist James S. Coleman (1988) added the sociological approach to the theory of social capital. He argued that social actions of individuals are shaped by the environment, with the rational ideas of economists and individuals are shaped by the social context and act for self-interest. According to him social capital '' is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure'' (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). His view of social capital parallels with Bourdieu's, in the understanding of a range of social ties individuals create thanks to their participation in social networks. For both Bourdieu and Coleman social capital is a resource for individuals to achieve certain benefits. For Coleman,however, social capital exists on two dimensions; as a source of benefits to individuals belonging to a close-knit community, as well as all members within the community. He emphasized community improvement based on strong ties, trust, trustworthiness, and social norms in the network in order to form a powerful social capital (Coleman, 1988).

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

An American political scientist Robert Putnam is definitely the most popular and most cited academic (Claridge, 2020) in the field of social capital theory. According to him, "social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p. 35). Putnam agrees with Bourdieu and Coleman that social capital makes it possible to achieve certain ends that would not be possible in its absence (Putnam, 1993). However,

contrary to Bourdieu and Coleman, Putnam focuses on the collective side of social capital, looking into the social structures formed by weak ties, for instance; clubs, associations or organizations. His communitarian dimension of social capital emphasizes trust and reciprocity as products of quality networks and shared norms, which provide common good for all members of a community - given the fact the community is created by weak ties (Hyyppä, 2010). He follows Coleman's idea of using social capital for communal good. However, where Coleman emphasized strong social ties, Putnam talks about weak-tied communities and treats social capital as the source of a public good. In his view, building social capital is the ''key to making democracy work'' (Putnam, 1993, p. 185).

1.1 Criticism

Despite being the most popular, Putnam has received immense criticism for his social capital concept. Putnam's social capital originates in weak ties in the community that reinforce positive benefits for individuals and the whole group. Critics of Putnam argue it is also essential to look on the opposite side of social capital; its negative consequences. One of the first academics to criticize Putnam's social capital is Portes, who argues with ''negative social capital'' (1998, p. 15). ''Indeed it is our sociological bias to see good things emerging out of sociability'' (Portes, 1998, p. 12). According to him, social capital has four potential negative consequences; ''exclusion of outsiders'' (e.g. minorities), ''excess claims on group members'' (e.g. free-riding problem), ''restriction of individual freedoms'' (e.g. demands for group conformity) and ''downward leveling norms'' (e.g. deviant and criminal behavior becomes the new norm; Mafia's, Gang's) (Portes, 1998, p. 15).

Further, Portes points out the circularity in Putnam's definition. Putnam particularly lacks the distinction between the resources of social capital and an individual's social networks. Various academics of individual social capital have criticized communitarian social capital for its circularity. According to them, this paradox could be avoided by letting social capital exist on its individual level (Hyyppä, 2010). Even Putnam directly writes that trust is needed for trust to be created. ''Trust lubricated cooperation.. and cooperation itself breeds trust'' (Putnam, 1993a, p. 171). The dilemma of his cyclical arguments layers in levels of trust, reciprocity and cooperation. According to him,

social capital is essentially created by the fact that if we trust somebody, it generates in them trust and reciprocity towards us (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, working with the concept of trust in theory and research is problematic, mainly due its subjectivity. Eventually, as Putnam explains, social trust, reciprocity, and successful cooperation are mutually reinforcing (1993b).

Besides Putnam, Coleman faces a similar critique. According to Portes (1998), his definition is too vague and lacks the distinction between social capital resources and consequences. Coleman defines social capital at the individual level but sees the significance of community ties as crucial for the benefits of an individual (Hyyppä, 2010). This makes the definition confusing since it originates in both; individual and communitarian dimensions. Portes thus argues that his definition needs to separate ''the possessors of social capital, the sources of social capital and resources themselves'' (Portes, p. 6).

1.2 Common Ground

Despite the criticism and different definitions of all three scholars, their social capital theories have many common aspects that show the essence of social capital. Bourdieu's individualistic approach emphasizes social networks as a provider of private good for an individual with connections (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Coleman, social capital provides benefits for both – the individual and a close-knit group they belong to (Coleman, 1988). Finally, Putnam's communitarian approach explains that social norms of reciprocity, trust and social networks create cooperation and mutual benefits for all members of weak-tied communities (Putnam, 1993, 2000). All these dimensions share a common idea, that is keenly summarized by social anthropologist and neuroscientist Marrkku T. Hyyppä;

> Social capital denotes resources embedded in and acquired from social networks and interactions based on *connecting ties, trust and reciprocity[1]*, through which members of a collective can attain various ends or outcomes that are of benefit for the individual and/or the collective. (2010, p. 17)

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[1] [emphasis mine]

Hence, social capital built with either weak or strong ties is created through communication, and social trust as mediating mechanisms that bring positive consequences from social capital (Hyyppä, 2010). It represents benefits of living a social life, and being a part of a society.

Hyyppä's definition of the common building blocks of social capital - *social ties, trust and reciprocity* - is exceptionally relevant to the analysis of the creation of social capital by the WoW guilds and thus, it will be used, from now on, as the guiding principle of this study and its empirical analysis.

1.3 The Essence of Social Ties

As Aristotle once said; human beings are social animals. We are born into social groups and live as a part of a society for all of our lives – unless you're castaway – and therefore, we naturally seek the companionship of others. In his book Politics, Aristotle says; ''anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city-state-he is either a beast or a god'' (1998, p. 5). Without any form of socialization, one would feel isolated and hopeless – as Tom Hanks showed in his film Cast Away in 2000. Individuals do not exist without society, and society does not exist without individuals. We strive for socialization, and the quality of our social bonds has an immense impact on our mental well-being. ''Social contact is like a vaccine'' claims psychologist Susan Pinker (2014, p. 256). Social contact has the potential to protect us from feelings of loneliness, help us feel more understood and enables us to feel protected or supported (Pinker, 2014) on either individual or collective levels of social capital. These positive feelings are enabled through core aspects of social capital; trust, reciprocity and cooperation.

RECIPROCITY, TRUST, COOPERATION

As it has been outlined above, reciprocity, trust and cooperation can be perceived as the building blocks of social ties as well as social capital. For the purposes of this work and its empirical analysis, it is important to understand how they affect and relate to each other.

Even though each of these aspects of SC can be explained on its own, they deeply influence and reinforce each other (model 1). As Putnam writes; ''social trust, norms of reciprocity, networks of civic engagement, and successful cooperation are mutually reinforcing'' (1993b, p. 180). One needs to be evaluated trustworthy to start to cooperate. Cooperation is enforced by trust based on reciprocity. Trust is built through cooperation and reciprocity both reinforces and is reinforced by trust and cooperation.

Model 1 Aspects of Social Capital
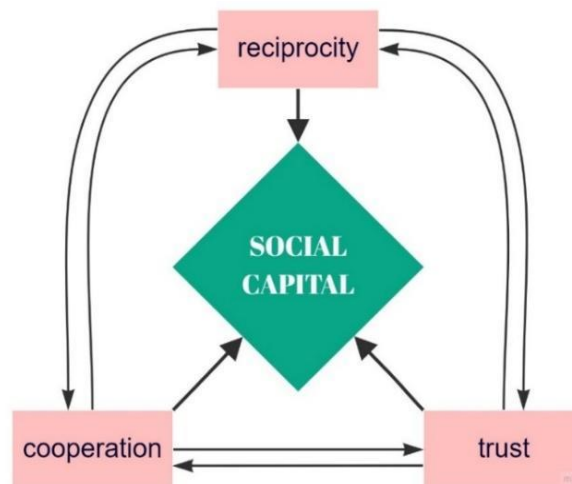
Reciprocity

Robert Axelord captures reciprocity nicely in his book, Evolution of Cooperation: ''once the word gets out that reciprocity works, it becomes the thing to do'' (1984, p. 189). In this context, reciprocal behavior can be understood as willingness to help others, for long-term benefit (West, Griffin, & Gardner, 2006). It is a ''combination of short-term altruism and long-term self-interest'' (Putnam, 1993, p. 172). Putnam divides reciprocity into particularized and generalized. The former refers to ''simultaneous exchange of items of equivalent value'' (1993, p. 172). For example, when an office organizes secret Santa, or exchange of holiday presents. Whereas the later refers to ''a continuing relationship of exchange that is at any given time unrequired or imbalanced, but that involves mutual expectations that a benefit granted now should be repaid in the future'' (1993, p. 172). This type of reciprocity supports altruism (Warren, 2008) and according to all of the above mentioned social capital theorists, it is an essential element of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman 1990; Putnam, 1993, 2000). As Axelord said ''once cooperation based upon reciprocity gets established in a population, it

cannot be overcome even by a cluster of individuals who try to exploit the other'' (Axelrod, 1984, p. 189).

Trust

Trust is the trickiest to describe since it is such an abstract concept (Herreros, 2004), based on an individual's subjective perception. It seems to be an expression of how people evaluate the world around them depending on their internal state, personality or experiences, instead of a response to their environment (Newton, 2001). When characterizing trust, social theory talks about two factors of trust: risk and cooperation. As Coleman interprets, it is rather an individual's ''decision to trust'' while expecting gain – benefit, or loss - risk (1990). When we evaluate the decision of other's trustworthiness, it reflects our subjective expectations. (Herreros, 2004; Newton 2001). Uncertainty of other's trustworthiness is essential for the notion of trust (Gambetta, 1988). According to Herreros, trust is also influenced by an individual's reputation, because only then does it generate an obligation to honor it. For trust to be generated in social capital it needs to be tied to reciprocal behavior - if an individual supposes that their trust will generate obligation in the trustee to reciprocate – trust them back and honor the trust (Herreros, 2004). If cooperation is supported by a decision to trust and expectation that the co-member will reciprocate your behavior, mutual trust can be established. Furthermore, the greater level of mutual trust enforced by continual relationships, the greater is the likelihood of cooperation that builds social capital (Putnam, 1993). This ties to the Axelord's tit for tat approach, where you reciprocate and follow the acts of another person (more explained in the following subchapter). ''It is necessary not only to trust others before acting cooperatively, but also to believe that one is trusted by others'' (Gambetta, 1988, p. 3). Putnam supports this assumption by writing that ''trust that is required to sustain cooperation is not blind'' (1993, p. 171). Trust based on reciprocity enables all actors to benefit from resources of each other and helps to form more extensive cooperative networks (Warren, 2008). ''Trustworthiness lubricates social life'' (Putnam, 2000, p. 18) and ''trust lubricates cooperation'' (Putnam, 1993, p. 171).

Cooperation

In his book Why We Cooperate, Michael Thomasello argues that humankind is naturally drawn to cooperate. According to him, successful cooperation breeds itself in; coordination and communication, tolerance and trust, norms and institutions (Thomasello, 2008). Through these processes, people enable feelings of ''we-ness'' described in Putnam's Bowling Alone (2000). Similarly to Thomasello, Robert Axelord claims that cooperation is possible even in a world ''full of egoists''. Axelord claims that cooperation can be generally promoted by continual interaction between individuals that generates trustworthiness, cooperation based on reciprocity, and tit for tat strategy. ''Tit for tat is the policy of cooperating on the first move and then doing whatever the other player did on the previous move'' (1984, p. 13). This strategy is based on four elements; ''being nice'' - prevents unnecessary trouble, ''provocable'' - prevents others revolt, ''forgiving'' - restores mutual cooperation, ''and clear'' - makes behavioral pattern easy to recognize and cooperate with it (1984, p. 176). This strategy brings out cooperation from others based on reciprocity and mutual goal and answers to the famous Prisoner's Dilema – a game theory that shows two rational individuals might not cooperate. Axelrod's strategy for cooperation is based on reciprocal behavior which is the core aspect of social capital and thus, social capital itself is a solution to Prisoner's Dilemma.

Working together

Finally, to illustrate how cooperation, reciprocity and trust work on individual and collective level of social capital, Markku Hyyppä smoothly summarizes it in his book Healthy Ties (2010). On an individual-level, trust develops into generalized trust – towards others, social trust - inside community, and trust in institutions. Reciprocity arises in norms, solidarity, togetherness, sense of belonging, sense of community, we-attitude, collective action and cooperation. On a collective-level, trust develops as particularized trust – in community, and trust in institutions. Reciprocity manifests as through figures of norms, democratic attitudes, social cohesion or neighborhood quality (p. 24).

Furthermore, to form social capital in the first place, trust, reciprocity and cooperation need to be built in social ties created through the interactions of individuals. Here, social capital theory differentiates between two forms of social ties; 'weak ties' and 'strong ties' – bridging and bonding.

BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bridging social capital consists of individuals or groups formed of weak ties, for instance; associations, clubs, voluntary organizations, civil rights movements, summer camps, colleagues, classmates or acquaintances. According to sociologist Mark Garnovetter ''weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle'' (1973, p. 209). This is because bridging social capital connects a broader range of people from diverse social backgrounds, such as; gender, class, ethnicity, race or belief, and essentially bridges separate individuals and networks together (Hyyppä, 2010). ''This feature of bridging capital makes it more likely to expose people to fresh information and resources, which is hypothesized to be more useful in helping people get ahead'' (Briggs, 1998; Putnam, 2002, as cited in Zhang, 2011, p. 122). Bridging social capital is represented by Bourdieu (1986) who stresses the benefits of individuals, and Putnam who sees the benefits on a communal level. On an individual level, examples of positive outcomes can be: economic advance, upward mobility in social class, political power, prestige or increased tolerance and acceptance of different people (Garnovetter, 1973; Bourdieu 1986). On the collective level, benefits include: common good, information flow, collective action, 'we' mentality, and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 1993, 2000). According to Putnam, communitarian bridging of social capital is a powerful tool to motivate civic engagement, promote democracy, efficient governance, and therefore, accelerate economic growth (Putnam, 1993). Bridging social capital essentially expands opportunities for people and could be labeled as ''social leverage that helps one get ahead'' (Briggs, 1998, p. 178). Furthermore, bridging social ties among individuals have the potential to form into bonding ties and hence, create bonding social capital.

BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bonding social capital is characterized by strong ties among individuals or within a group, for example: close relationships with colleagues or classmates, friendships, relatives, or romantic partners. Strong ties are created among people with common social backgrounds because as Garnovetter describes, people are inclined to ''homophily - the tendency to choose as friends those similar to oneself'' (1973, p. 210). These types of ties are often intimate, confidential and emotionally strong. Hence, they tend to be the best source of ''emotional aid and other social support'' (Briggs, 1998, p. 188). Bonding social capital itself can be, according to social scientist Xavier Briggs, simply described as ''social support that helps one get by or cope'' (1998, p. 178). Close-knit communities create a sense of belonging, particularized trust, specific reciprocity and strong in -group loyalty. On an individual level, they are important to provide us with social, material or psychological support (Coleman 1988, Briggs, 1998). Bonding social capital can be a great source of support for minority groups, such as people with mental or physical disabilities, LGBTQ+ members or racial minorities. The importance of bonding social capital is stressed by Coleman (1988).

1.5 How Do We Connect ?

The particularity of social capital lies in the combination of individual and communal social aspects and the usage of its resources. These resources – social contacts – provide us with various benefits ranging from mental support, a sense of belonging, various types of information, all the way to job opportunities. As previously stated, social bonds are essential for our well-being. Through communication and connectedness, people are able to increase their trust towards each other and build continuous, mutually benefiting relationships. There are two types of communication; Face to Face (from now on referred to as FtF) and Computer Mediated Communication (from now on referred to as CMC).

FtF contact is still the leading form of social connection, despite the rise in social media and virtual communication usage in recent decades. We use FtF communication when speaking to friends, having classes or team meetings and other offline social activities. The essence of FtF communication resides in physical contact and both verbal and

nonverbal elements. Nonverbal communication includes facial expressions, gestures, body language, tone of voice, physical touch, personal space or eye contact (Cherry, 2021). This type of communication creates ninety-three per cent of our social interactions (Phutela, 2015) and hence, having offline discussions allows participants to exchange quality information since they can understand body language and facial expressions better. Putnam emphasizes FtF communication as an essential building block of social capital and good democracy. According to him, offline contact enables people to learn to trust one another, and establish norms of reciprocity within the group. In-group reciprocity is then exercised in society through collective action in pursuit of shared goals.

However, in the last two years of the pandemic, FtF contact is very restricted and people have been isolated for weeks to months in their homes. Due to this situation, FtF communication obtained a new dimension of video calls through Skype, Zoom or Discord Even though CMC provides us with many benefits and it has become an inseparable part of our pandemic world, we cannot detect the full range of the nonverbal gestures that we do in our offline social interactions. This might lead to miscommunication, lowered trust or artificial impressions of others (Anderson, et al., 1997; Fullwood, 2007; Canny & Nguyen, 2009).

Despite its disadvantages, CMC has been a prevalent form of social contact in the last two years. CMC or ''digitally-mediated'' communication is any transaction of social contact between two digital devices, for instance; emails, text messages, or any exchange in online space (Yao & Ling, 2020). Robert Putnam talks about CMC in relation to social capital in his book Bowling Alone (2000) where Putnam criticizes CMC for its absence of social cues and non-verbal communication which, according to him, causes lowered solidarity due to depersonalization (p. 190). CMC is not beneficial for social capital because according to Putnam, it decreases human's effectiveness of sensing ''nonverbal messages from one another, particularly about emotions, cooperation, and trustworthiness'' (p.188). According to him, CMC does not contribute to social capital as a whole, it may only serve as a supplementary tool to FtF communication (p. 193). On the other hand, he highlights many advantages that CMC provides to a group such as - connectedness of people from various geographical areas,

support of civic engagement, rich resources of information, gathering opinions, debating alternatives, and support of large yet fluid groups (p. 187, p. 190). As time and technologies progressed, many academics focused on the benefits of CMC in virtual spaces through social media, video-based media platforms, or online videogames.

Having outlined the social meanings and contributions of FtF and CMC communication in the context of social capital, the following chapter will explore computer-mediated ties in one of the most well-known online multiplayer video games, World of Warcraft as it will inquire if despite the lack of FtF, players are able to create social capital.

2. CHAPTER: Methodology and Research Design

Up to now, this study has discussed the theoretical background of social capital theory. Even though social capital is built through many variables, this research considers reciprocity, trust, and cooperation as the three main building blocks of social capital. Accordingly, each of them is explained through the lens of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. To avoid any confusion about the different definitions of social capital, Hyyppä's summary of social capital[2] will be perceived as general understanding of social capital in the empirical part of this thesis. In addition to the theory, we discussed two different types of social capital; bridging and bonding, its benefits, and the distinction between CmC and FtF. This distinction becomes relevant in the empirical part of the study, since the communication in virtual environments is computer-based.

In the empirical part, first we will apply social capital theory to one of the most well-known MMORPGs, World of Warcraft. WoW supports socialization, community and provides its players with the option to create collaborative, long-term associations, called guilds. Same as in the case of social capital, reciprocity, trust and cooperation are essential for the building and sustenance of a guild as well. Through these three aspects, we further analyze the potential ground for building social capital in guilds by examining their inner dynamic. On a larger scale, guilds serve us as our case study for examination of reciprocity, trust, cooperation, communication and social ties among members in virtual environments. In this study, our dependent variable is the player's membership in a guild that is influenced by an independent variable of building social capital through reciprocity, cooperation, trust, communication, and social ties. Interviewing variables include sense of belonging, shared space and experiences, collective identity, and connectedness in the guild. Antecedent variables that occur before others include the following: how much time players dedicate to WoW, when they first started playing, time as a member in the guild, and their activity in the guild. After we analyze the general theory in relation to guilds, our individual-based deduction begins. By applying the theoretical concepts on the collected data, we examine whether guild members can benefit from social capital by their participation in the guilds.

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[2] Described on page 14

The data for this study were collected through the use of qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews. It is important to note that through the qualitative approach I do not try to measure the social capital in its collective sense since as Fukuyama remarks, ''One of the greatest weaknesses of the social capital concept is the absence of consensus on how to measure it'' (2000, para. 20). Rather I seek to examine what effect social capital has on individuals' lives. Qualitative research proves to be the most adequate method for the purposes of this study because it focuses on "social processes over time" (Babbie, 2014, p. 304). In this light, my study explicitly researches two aspects: a) the social processes that exist in guilds; b) what benefits these processes might provide to its members over time. I interviewed ten different respondents who have had an experience with guild membership. Respondents were collected through a non-probability method of convenience. Among the respondents, three participants are from the Czech Republic and seven from Slovakia. To increase variability, respondents include three women and seven men, from ages of 20 to 33. Approximate length of playing World of Warcraft was 10 years, with exception of one respondent, playing for only one year. Eight respondents have been members of more than one guild in their life. And all have been a part of some guild for at least several months. To achieve an authentic feeling, I asked permission from my respondents to use their in-game names as a way of referring to them in the research. Thus, in my empirical part, the respondents[3] are referred to with their character names, and their age is included in the brackets.

Respondents were at first approached by text-based communication, with a brief summary of my topic. After their consent, we proceeded to the interviews, with two respondents by FtF communication and eight through a video call. Video-call method was used due to respondents' long-distance places of residence. Interviews were conducted during December 2021 and, with informed consent, recorded and accordingly transcribed in form of notes and direct quotes. Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed respondents to go in-depth about certain topics. To increase reliability, every participant was asked the same set of questions concerning community, cooperation, trust, reciprocity, social ties, social skills, life in the guild, and the guild's impact on their real life. However, the tone of interviews was casual, and

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[3] List of all interviews is included in the Appendix on page 51

after asking a set question, I followed up with additional questions, depending on the interview's answer.

The qualitative method is beneficial for the larger understanding of individuals' in-depth perspectives on the researched topic as it also allows the interviewer to adapt the conversation, based on what respondents start to speak about. Qualitative research significantly contributes to ''psycho-social aspects'' of the study (Leung, 2015, p. 324). This method does not examine causal relationships, rather it looks into the themes, interpretations, and meanings of interviewees' responses. However, qualitative studies have their drawbacks - the findings cannot be generalized, results do not show causality, and in some instances, they may lead to a bias.

Positive bias is one of the limitations this study possesses. This research aims to examine whether a membership in guilds builds an individual's social capital. I am, in a general sense, looking at the positive impacts of online games. My study does not examine, comment on or analyze the negative impacts. There are two reasons for this; first, online games in general have been considered to have more negative impacts than actual benefits. Hence, in this research I wanted to highlight the positive outcomes of gaming. As for the second reason, inclusion of research on the negative influence of online gaming and setting it into the context of my research question and hypothesis, is too vast a topic to cover in a bachelor thesis. However, a future master thesis or a doctoral dissertation might provide the appropriate space for further, more complex research into this topic. Another limitation of this study relates to the nature of qualitative research itself as we cannot draw any larger conclusions from the general Czech and Slovak population of WoW guild members. On the other hand, on the individual-level of social capital, the results of my thesis supported my original hypothesis and they can provide a potential basis for future Czecho-Slovak research.

The topic of this study was inspired primarily by works of Nick Yee, Zhi-Jon Zhong, Nicolas Ducheneaut & Robert Moore, who extensively researched if there are any effects of MMORPG play on gamers' real life. This study was further inspired by research books[4] that explored the concepts of trust, reciprocity, cooperation and

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[4] The Social Life of Avatars (collective of authors, 2002), Play Between Worlds (Taylor, 2006), Being There Together (Schroeder, 2011), Social Interactions in Virtual Worlds (collective of authors, 2018)

socialization in the online sphere. These studies, together with Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam serve in my study as secondary sources, while data from the interviews present the primary source. Korkeila (2021), explored 74 publications in which he specifically examined the relation between social capital and online videogames . His study found that eleven reviewed publications supported building of social capital both in the game and in real-life, 35 in the game, and 28 outside of the game. As far as my findings go, in the Czech and Slovak Republics, research discussing building of individual's social capital in online games is non-existent[5]. Hence, my study fills the research gap in these two countries.

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[5] The Role of Social Motivation and Sociability of Gamers in Online Game Addiction (Blinka, Mikuška, 2014) is the only research I found that discusses MMO games in relation to social ties.

3. CHAPTER: Building Social Capital through the Virtual Realm

While the first chapter explains social capital theory, this chapter applies its concepts to the virtual world of World of Warcraft (WoW). WoW is one of the most well-known and well-loved MMORPG (multi-massive online role playing game) games with the peak of its popularity in 2010, when the global number of its subscribers reached 12 million players (Statista Research Department, 2016). In MMORPG, players level up their avatars and get to interact with other players in an open world. Hence, what distinguishes MMORPG from single-player video games is the co-presence as well as the social interactions in the game. It is a standard of MMORPG that nudges players to form various long-term in-game communities to enjoy a social atmosphere and achieve common goals that are not possible by a solo play. It is also usual for MMORPGs to have more challenging quests. This way, people are encouraged to create groups and cooperate to succeed in completing the task together (Taylor, 2006). Due to this community aspect, many social researchers examined the possible impacts and influences of MMORPG on social capital.

A group of five most acknowledged academics in the virtual communities research field carried out a first of a kind investigation of this topic in America. Their research, *The Social Life of Guilds in World of Warcraft* (Ducheneaut, Nickell, Williams, Xiong, & Yee, 2006), concludes that guild membership benefits players with both bridging and bonding social capital, and social skills. Similarly, Zhin-Jin Zhong, in her study regarding the effects of the collective MMORPG play on gamers' social capital, concludes that participation in guilds builds collective social capital. According to her, members train skills of social interactions and teamwork, cultivate shared responsibility and foster norms of generalized reciprocity (Zhong, 2011). The same results are confirmed by interviews in this research.

This chapter focuses on the social groups of WoW, commonly named guilds, and with the support of primary and secondary sources, analyzes potential applications of social capital and its influence on the guild members.

3.1 MMORPG

Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games are usually set in fantastical open worlds full of cities, public spaces or forests, filled with quests as they also allow interactions with other players across the world through self-created avatars. All events or interactions in these online spaces progress even if the player is not logged in (Yee, 2006a). The sense of community among players is created and supported mainly through the shared space, communal events, and the liveliness of the world (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2007). Most MMORPGs have cities that resemble real-world cities, and large public spaces or buildings as bars, parks, banks or marketplaces. ''As such, they represent a fascinating laboratory to observe sociability online in a setting that tries, by design, to reproduce the features of some successful social spaces of the physical world'' (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2007, p. 3). One of the most influential researchers of the MMORPG field, Nick Yee (2006), recognizes three main motivations that draw people to play multiplayer online games – immersion, achievement and socialization. Socialization in these environments is accomplished through casual chats or in-game public places, helping others, creating relationships or teamwork (Yee, 2006b). This is possible mainly because most MMORPGs require cooperation with other users, which usually resolves into mutual benefits (Yee, 2006a). Thus, the difference between MMORPG and other games is the sense of shared space and experience, its collaborative essence, socialization in groups and building one's reputation within it (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004, p. 1). Tied to the MMORPG aspects, Runerbreakes (20) states; *''I prefer to play MMORPG because you create and have your own community there, you build your character and reputation, it is very similar to the real life but easier and in addition, set in fantasy world''.* Taryska (26) also describes her passion of MMORPG; *''I cannot imagine playing solo, it is weird, I need people to play''.* Joining an in-game group can benefit players by creating social bonds with people they might have never met. Despite the communication being computer-mediated, these ties have the potential to form significant friendships, provide social or psychological support, encouragement, teamwork and fun (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). MMORPGs are ''environments where the relationships that form and the derived experiences can rival those of the physical world'' (Yee, 2006a, p. 325). Hence, even CMC relationships have the potential to strengthen through the shared space, experiences and mutual goals in the game.

3.2 WOW Effect of WoW

One of the most popular MMORPGs is World of Warcraft (WoW), released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004. To be able to play, people need to pay a subscription of 12.99€ per month (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022). Despite the fairly high price, WoW reached its peak with 12 million players in 2010 and - according to the latest published company data - dropped to 5.5 million players in 2015 (Statista Research Department, 2016). Despite the drop, 5.5 million people is essentially the population size of Slovakia, so it still makes a very significant number of people interact in one virtual space.

A WORLD TO GET LOST IN

World of Warcraft is set in a fantasy world called Azeroth, full of magic, fights and limitless adventures. Azeroth is inhabited by many races scattered on four continents and islands, has rich lore, culture, its mythology, legends, heroes. At the beginning of gameplay, players choose from two opposing factions struggling for dominance; the Alliance or the Horde. Belonging to a certain faction is determined by a race that the player chooses when creating their character. Races as orcs, trolls or goblins belong to the Horde, and humans, gnomes or dwarfs are from the Alliance. After the race, players have to choose from different classes, for example, mage, warrior or druid. A character's class predisposes the abilities, powers, skills and spells players will gain through quests and determines the style of gameplay available to that character. Throughout the game, the player also learns and adopts many talents, skills, primary professions (e.g. blacksmithing, jewelcrafting, tailoring) and secondary professions (cooking, first aid, archeology, fishing) (Wowpedia, n.d.). These choices not only provide players with many possibilities of adjusting character to their preferences, individualistic expression, and the way they want to adjust their gameplay but also determine the role in the game as well as in the guild. There are three essential roles for in-game characters in combat: tank, damage, and healer. Each of them has different attributes and responsibilities. Tanks take in damage and prevent others from being attacked, damages are responsible for dealing damage to the enemy and healers keep their co-fighters alive (Wowpedia, n.d.). There are two types of group combats; dungeons and raids. Dungeons are for a party of up to five players and are filled with

various enemies. As Runnebreakes describes *''dungeons are admission tickets for raids''.* That is because radis are more challenging and designed for a maximum of 40 players. The challenge lies in both the powerful enemies and the ability of the group to think strategically, follow raid leader orders and play as a team. After accomplishing dungeons or raids, players are rewarded with various items and skill points. WoW has no ending goal, rather it lets players explore the world, fulfill quests, improve character, fight in dungeons or raids, and engage with the environment as both, a solo player or in a guild. The definition of a guild is according to the Oxford Dictionary ''medieval association of craftsmen or merchants for a common purpose'' (2008, p. 302). World of Warcraft guilds can be easily described in the same manner. Players with different sets of skills and talents form a long-term association for a common goal.

THE SOCIAL SIDE OF WoW

World of Warcraft supports various social aspects in its gameplay. In the first place, WoW provides players a variety of emotions and non-verbal signs their character communicates to other players, for example; kiss, cry, nod, clap, wink, etc. (Wowhead, 2019). This way, game designers try to substitute for the lack of FtF communication. By adding non-verbal aspects of daily communications, it makes the game experience more realistic and personal. Next feature are in-game communication channels. Player can either join public chat channels, or create a group chat with in-game friends. Through the public chat, people currently online can communicate, recruit for guilds or exchange goods among each other. Friend based channels serve for less formal activities and general chatting (Wowhead). Certainly, the most important social feature is the existence of guilds. Guilds are a well-appreciated community aspect of WoW that essentially makes people get together, engage with others, and work for a mutual goal. Guilds organize a community of people who, even though they might not know each other FtF, have an opportunity to extend their social ties through CMC. Guilds usually create group-based chat channels through various communication services[6]. These are used to organize fights, set guild rules, and communication during play but also as a hanging out place for general discussions and talking about personal lives. This way, the guild becomes a place for exchange of information, establishment of new

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[6] Among my interviews, 100% of respondents use Discord

relationships, and in general a core aspect for social life in the game (Taylor, 2006). Despite the disadvantages CMC brings, through playing together, players often strengthen their existing friendships or build new relationships. This is mainly due to the guild's regular interactions, communication, shared space and identity, cooperative environment, mutual support, trust, and contribution to common resources (Ducheneaut, et al., 2006, Nardi & Harris, 2006, Ramirez, 2018). In the light of my interviews, 40% of interview respondents created long-lasting friendships with people they met through guilds, and 60% strengthened their existing relationships.

UNFORTUNATE GAME STRATEGY: CHANGES IMPACTING THE WoW COMMUNITY

World of Warcraft heavily supports friendships and cooperation among its players. Besides attractive graphics and many possibilities, this game provides, its most outstanding aspect is its community that players create and spend hours hanging out or fighting within Azeroth. However, in the last few years, Blizzard has continuously changed course from this approach to attract more new players. Whereas before, it was very demanding and difficult to accomplish the final game boss fight – and various other challenges – without being a part of the guild, now the game provides a possibility to find and join a newly formed group. This leaves the player without a need for interaction or communication during fights and can leave right after it is over. This way, the creators wanted to make it easier for new players to experience high-game content, without a need to be a part of a guild. What they achieved instead, is a massive outflow of the player base, which did not like this new feature. Mainly because they feel like it took out the primary element of the game - community, and made achieving challenging tasks easier and less of a community experience. Few interviewees, mainly those who play for long years, summarize these changes and their impacts on the game;

> *While before a player could see only statistics of guilds and see which one is the best – and wanted to join, now there are statistics about each player, which in my opinion makes the game more individualistic. In the past, guild meant that you had people to play with, while now you can play with random people and do not care about the community. In the past, players needed to be a part of guild, otherwise you could not play successfully.* (Rjú, 29)

In the new versions of the game, the social aspect is on decline. Now, you just use group finder and it connects you to a formed group. You can make progress without need to speak a word. Before, this was unimaginable. Players had to be a part of the guild and communicate various strategies, roles, teamplay and selection of people for raids. Players now are satisfied after accomplishing the dungeon, but in reality they did not learn anything about strategic thinking, cooperation, or how to improve their character. They care only about the goal, and not the journey (Runebreakes, 20)

3.3 Social Capital and Guilds

As highlighted in the first chapter, social ties, reciprocity, trust and cooperation represent the main building blocks of social capital. All of the above are also the building blocks of the WoW guilds. Hence, it is interesting to examine the likelihood of building active guild members' social capital through this virtual online game space.

GUILDS

WoW guilds are mainly formed to make progression in the game easier, and create a social atmosphere. Even though some players can choose solo gameplay without joining guild, it is not usual since guilds can provide players with easier access to end-game content[7] (Taylor, 2006). Guild membership offers various benefits including a sense of community, potential friendships, more in-game opportunities, trading, and exposure to various people who have mastered a certain skill or class and can share their knowledge with others. Guilds can be created by strangers or acquaintances[8] or by group of classmates or friends[9], and their size can vary from a few dozens of people to hundreds. All depends on whether the mutual goal of a guild is focused more socially or on progression.

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[7] Refers to the point at the game, when the maximum level of the character is reached and hence, player can bring attention to other activities

[8] Bridging social ties

[9] Bonding social ties

There are two basic types of guilds; social guilds which highlight personal connections and community, and raiding guilds that are more focused on raids, end game content, progress and achievements (Taylor, 2006). In terms of the interview respondents, 60% of them currently belong to a social guild and 40% to a raid guild. However, 70% have experiences with both. Out of the latter group, every respondent prefered social guilds, mainly because raiding guilds are very demanding and time consuming[10]. As in every community, a form of hierarchy is present in guilds as well. The most important role is that of a guild master[11], who is the main leader and cares about the general organization and the general well-being of the guild. The rest of the leaders hold a position of officers, who fulfill various tasks from organizing raids, recruiting new members or teaching players how to master specific classes. Fifty percent of the respondents had experience with some kind of leadership. In raiding guilds, the leadership is responsible for the management, organization, strategization, and coordination of the members. Raids are the most demanding and complex challenges in WoW, that require teamwork, coordination, cooperation, communication and discipline among the players. To succeed players are expected to fulfill one's role in the group, help out others and even practise or study their characters (Ducheneaut, et al., 2006). Rjú (29) compares his membership in the raiding guild to a collective sport. *''At the time I did play collective sports, not only esport[12], and I remember that I took it equally seriously; trainings, meetings, strategies.. it was fun and a real dedication at the same time''.* In social guilds, the leadership organizes raids as well, but the focus is more on the fun along the way rather than progress and success. At any rate, both types of guild form a community from which its members derive social capital benefits. These benefits will be separately discussed later in the chapter[13]. For players in general, being a part of a guild means that they have constant access to a group of people with whom they can share emotions, thoughts and experiences through hanging out and playing together. For Runebreakes (20), participating in the guild means that *''you can share ups and downs with people. I enjoy that hundreds of people meet at the same place, want to achieve the same goal and live through the same emotions and experiences''.* Etysha (21) similarly describes her emotions, *''I am charmed by the fact that dozens of people share and want to*

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[10] Raids usually last between two to eight hours
[11] Always enforced by founder of the guild
[12] Refers to organized multiplayer video games competitions, usually between professional players
[13] Starting on page 38

succeed in one common goal''. What the interview respondents describe here is a concept of Melucci's collective identity which is produced ''by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action'' (1989, p. 34). After joining a guild, players take on a collective identity which further separates them as a group from others in the game (Ramirez, 2018). Individuals essentially merge their individual identities in a collective one, which creates a feeling of belonging and 'we-ness' which further supports social skills and relationships.

As mentioned in the section on the *Unfortunate Game Strategy: Changes Impacting WoW Community*[14], currently it is possible to join dungeons and raids without guild membership. These groups are formed by PUGs (pick-up groups), that randomly select players who want to engage in the same combat. However, every respondent who discussed PUGs dislikes them, and prefers to play with guild members. Runebreakes (20) reflects on the distinction among these; *''It is as if you had to make a decision, whether to go on a trip with friends you trust and know you will have fun, or choose to go with strangers. It might end well, but you will always choose friends''.* This metaphor effectively summarizes and supports the sense of the collective feeling in guilds. Collective identity, in social theory described as ''we-ness'' by Putnam (Putnam, 2000) is reinforced by cooperation, reciprocity and trust in the community (Thomasello, 2008). Accordingly, in this setting, both individuals and collective derive social capital benefits by their participation (Hyyppä, 2010). In guilds, its members care for each other more, by equating collective identity and shared experiences, mutual tasks and goals, offering help and discussion about their personal lives (Ramirez, 2018).

The above presented arguments indicate that guilds can be perceived as micro-societies of communal units. Even though based on CMC, same as the communities of the offline world, guild members co-exist together in a shared space with an internal organization that is formed for a particular purpose. As in any community, members of the guild are obliged to follow a set of rules and norms, take on various roles, fulfill given tasks, and contribute with resources to the well-being and collaboration of the guild. To put guilds in the light of previously defined social capital concepts: ''the aggregate of the actual or potential resources obtained through membership in a group'' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249), ''social structures that facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure''

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[14] See on page 31

(Coleman, 1988, p. 98) and ''features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'' (Putnam, 1993b, p. 35), all three definitions can be applied on a function of the guild. In ''Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital'', Coleman (1988), suggests that ''a norm within a collectivity reinforced by social support, status, honor and other rewards, is the social capital that builds young nations'' (p. 104). Through the virtual reality lens, these characteristics do not really build young nations, but definitely create a successful community within a guild.

RECIPROCITY, TRUST AND COOPERATION IN GUILDS

Community feeling of guilds in which members cooperate when pursuing dungeons and raids further reinforces reciprocity and trust among players. As already stated, reciprocity, cooperation and trust reinforce each other and that applies for guilds as well.

By joining a guild, players are expected to follow given rules, cooperate, help out others, be responsible and act in good manners. All these are tied to reciprocity, since players expect others to behave according to the norms in the guild. In general, reciprocal behavior in guilds is formed by solidarity, norms, 'we-ness', collective action and cooperation (Hyyppä, 2010). One of the guild advantages is that players have a group of people who are willing to help them with leveling a certain class, or on a collective level, access end-game raids. *''Usually, when we lack a healer or a tank, someone creates this character so when it is needed in the future, they can log in and help out. For example, I created a healer which benefited the guild but also myself, considering the lack of healers, I was called for raids more frequently and skilled up faster''* (Crassula, 25). This is the example of generalized reciprocity[15], which is an essential element of building social capital. Members of guilds have also access to a guild bank which allows player to exchange items among players, or store items they do not need for others. *''People in the guild gifted each other with items, despite the fact that they could sell them in an auction''* (Rjú, 29). Simultaneous mutual exchange of items is considered to be particularized reciprocity[16]. Following the general

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[15] Definition on page 16
[16] Definition on page 16

definition of reciprocity as ''short-term altruism and long-term self interest'' (Putnam, 1993a, p. 172), it is definitely enforced in guilds. Rjú (29) remarks that this reciprocal essense of a guild even taught him real-life skills; *''I learnt that when I need something, I can benefit others with something else. For example, when someone shows me how to succeed in a certain dungeon, I can show them how to improve their character. Because trading of items or information is usual in the guilds, it essentially taught me how to negotiate and communicate with people''*. Henceforth, members in the guild exchange items, help out each other and not only exercise but also learn reciprocal behavior.

Although trust in guilds builds over time mainly through daily communication, it simultaneously depends on an individual's decision to trust Coleman, 1990) and the player's reputation (Herreros, 2004). Reputation is an essential component of MMORPGs, through which players see players' skills and level, which further determines gamer's success, acceptance and position in the guild (Taylor, 2006). This applies primarily to raiding guilds, where players are evaluated to be trustworthy by their character skills, determination, and ability to be responsible or punctual. In raiding guilds, it is very important to prove yourself, and show that you are good enough. Social guilds might consider a player's skill but their behavior is more important. Thus, reputation either in the form of behavior or skill is what influences trust and further cooperation among gamers. As Putnam highlights, trust is not blind (1993a). All study respondents evaluated the player's behavior as the main quality when deciding to trust someone, as well. Half of them were hesitant when asked about trust. They stated that it is difficult to trust someone at first, but they ''decide to trust'' and expand on it depending on the player's behavior. Across the interviews, the player's behavior is the main element that supports trustworthiness and enforces cooperation.

> *You judge people according to their skills and behavior. But when someone has good skills and behaves as an idiot you do not want to play with him. Even though the guild rules stated the priority are good results, in reality, after repeated idiotism these people were quickly kicked out. Afterall, guilds are about building a good community, you cannot play with toxic people several hours a day.* (Crassula, 25)

This was interesting to hear, since Crassula is a part of raiding guild and despite the rules, well-being of the community is placed above the success itself. As Runebreakers says *"World of Warcraft is essentially about trust. It forces you to trust others because that is the only way to achieve mutual goals"*. Hence, evaluation of trust and further cooperation heavily depends on communication and members' reciprocal behavior; help out others, do not exploit the team, act according to the rules and in good manners.

For guild members, successful cooperation is necessary to defeat dungeons, raids and through positive results build the guild's reputation in the game. Even though MMORPGs are collaborative by nature, WoW itself does not offer any structure for successful cooperation in guilds (Ducheneaut, et al., 2007, p. 847). The game provides players only with ''cooperative goal structures'' for example end-game content, ''mechanics and rules that enable support and cooperation'' – creation of groups and guilds and ''communication features'' that are in the form of in-game chat channels (Hamari, et al., 2017, p. 181). The success and quality of cooperation depends only on players themselves. *"WoW is essentially set as a real world. Everyone has their own role, needs to cooperate, and contribute for the guild... this then forms the community as a whole"* (Runnebreakes, 20). In dungeons and raids, each player has their own role (healer, tank or damage), and set of skills that complete each other. Since each character has its own strengths and weaknesses, it is inevitable for a successful combat group to be coordinated well, follow the strategy, be helpful, responsible, use their character's strength and cover for others' weaknesses. (Yee, 2006a). Thus, what players expect from each other is reciprocal cooperation based on trust and following rules of tit for tat strategy[17]. As stated, cooperation is reinforced by coordination, communication, tolerance, trust, 'we-ness', norms and continual relations (Axelord, 1984; Putnam 1993a; Thomasello, 2008). However, when the expectations are not fulfilled by some players, they can be easily kicked out from raid, or even a guild. This way guild members rather sacrifice one ''toxic'' member, for the higher good of the guild. As Putnam states, only reciprocal cooperation supported by the decision to trust, further reinforces mutual trust which can resolve in continuing relationships (Putnam, 1993a). Zhi-Jin Zhong, who researched the impact of MMORPG on social capital states; ''Those who take active part in frequent collective play and engage in successful

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[17] Explained on page 18

cooperation will enjoy better social capital'' (Zhong, 2011, p. 2361). Thus, those who are active and took upon a task of a leader, or are active in the guild, are more likely to derive social capital benefits. Zarathyn for example explicitly stated; ''*I might have benefited more from the guild if I had more time to be really committed*''(Zarthyn, 20). According to the interviews, 90% of the respondents benefited from social capital through creating new social ties, while 50% benefited by learning various social skills.

SOCIAL SKILLS

Social skills can be regarded as benefits that derive from social capital. Naturally, by being a part of some community, people are expected to fulfill given roles and duties, cooperate, be responsible, reciprocal, and when part of the leadership, coordinate, and motivate people. By continual relationships and reinforcement of these ideals, people can develop social or leadership skills that benefit them in real life. In the light of interviews, half of the respondents claimed they obtained or reinforced their social skills by being a part of the guild.

Responsible guild leadership can coordinate and motivate members for mutual goals that further resolve into a successful guild. ''The collaboration in MMORPGs can instill community responsibility, give rise to the norms of reciprocity and nourish common interest'' (Zhong, 2011, p. 2360). Hence, the position of a leader in the guild is very serious and needs to be managed well for guild to prosper. Neroc (24) compares his experience in guild leadership to actual work. *''Imagine you are in the office and have a CEO, that is our guildmaster, and then there are regional managers, who are WoW officers and manage separate branches or tasks''.* This is truly a great example, since guild's leadership has to deal with various tasks, for example; logistics, strategy, and assigning roles in raids, motivating players, resolving group conflicts, dealing with toxic behavior of individuals, and in general caring about well-being and cohesion in the guild (Yee, 2006a, p. 323). It can be concluded that guild is only as successful as is the leadership, but leadership is as successful as is players cooperative behavior. Guild masters expect following of rules, and cooperation from officers, as well as guild members, and guild members expect quality leadership. Thus, for a successful guild, responsibility, reliability, reciprocal cooperation and trust needs to be established among its members. Four out of five respondents who have an experience with guild

leadership, reported that through guild membership, they learnt or reinforced their social skills in real life. However, Crassula who never had a leadership experience, expressively highlights social skills he learned in the guild;

> *When you are a part of a guild like this, you learn how to be good at the game but also as a person. You learn to be assertive, self-confident and active, otherwise, in a guild with 250 members, you will become invisible. When you are active, communicative, and willing to learn and make an effort, then these experiences will transfer to your real life as well. I have been working for half a year, while my coworker for year and a half, and I already earn more money than him. All because I learnt how to be assertive, confident and independent… I learned how to obtain information, arrange things, and deal with or behave in front of people.*
> (Crassula, 25)

Crassula is the only respondent, who despite no leadership experience, obtained useful skills he exercises in his personal life. This might be because he was always a member of a raiding guild, which is usually more demanding and as he said, you need to make an effort to be seen as a good player. Apart from him, Neroc (24) had experiences with being both a guild master and an officer. *''I used leadership skills from WoW, in my actual work and even got promoted. Now, I am responsible for managing a branch in a bank''.* While discussing these two cases with academic consultant Tomáš Mališka, he pointed out these benefits are actually tied to Bourdieu's economic view of social capital. As a result of obtaining social skills from guild membership, Crassula and Neroc got a promotion - advanced economically. Through continual membership in a community that values mainly players' determination, willingness to learn, and cooperation based on reciprocity, both Neroc and Crassula were able to use their skills learned in virtual space, to economic advancement in their personal professional lives.

Acquirement or reinforcement of social skills through virtual experiences, was described by the rest of the respondents who have experiences with leadership as well; Etysha (21), Rjú (29) and Runnerbreakes (20). All of them highlighted different sets of skills and benefits they learned in the guild.

> *I learnt how to present ideas to the public in an understandable way. I also improved my communication with various types of people and practiced how to be patient, tolerant, understandable, and empathetic with others. Also, since you meet a lot of idiots online, you learn how to deal with them offline. I use these skills in my work as a financial adviser as well.* (Etysha, 21)

Etysha remarks that her social skills can be influenced also by her upbringing, since her mother emphasized her to be kind and understanding with people. However, she admits WoW experience allowed her to practice it, since she is an introvert and does not extensively communicate with people in real life. WoW allowed her to develop her mother's guidance. In Runebreaks' case, he also mentioned benefits such as tolerance, patience and not judging people by their appearance. Though through the interview, he mainly highlights benefits he acquired with leadership position;

> *Since I never had an opportunity to be in a leadership position before, it definitely benefited me a lot. Firstly, I realized I am not scared to lead people anymore and am even good at it. I learnt how to organize people and lead them to mutual goals, or resolve their conflicts, how to be patient, tolerable, gain respect, and create a pleasant and inspirative environment for the group.* (Runebreakes, 20)

Similarly to all mentioned interviewees, Runebreakes learnt how to work with people which he uses in daily interactions and a workplace. Finally, Rjú mainly highlighted benefits that can be considered as direct community benefits of the guild's social capital.

> *I learned how to trust strangers, collaborate, negotiate and be loyal to the common cause. Communal thinking - that things do not belong to me, but to us - is definitely another benefit WoW provided me with. I understood how to be committed and loyal to something, be a part of a community and understand that everyone is dealing with different things in their lives.* (Rjú, 29)

Across all answers, it became apparent that each person can obtain a different set of skills through their in-game experiences. Social skills derived from guilds can include leadership, management, people skills or learning how to be a part of a community. Learnt tolerance, patience and communication with people were the most occurring skills players benefited from guild membership. All of the mentioned respondents also expressed that they use in-game obtained or reinforced skills in their daily communication or workplaces. Even though there is a strong correlation between leadership position and obtained skills, participants stated that not only leadership but also membership alone definitely gained or reinforced their social skills.

In his study on experiences of MMORPG users, Nick Yee results also show that these games can indeed have an influence on people's real life-skills; ''These results are remarkable for MMORPG environments that were not designed to teach leadership skills, and have no structured pedagogical goals or curriculum. But more importantly, these findings demonstrate that real-life skills can be acquired or improved upon in these environments'' (Yee, 2006a, p. 323). Across interviews, Koščo (33) is the only respondent who, despite being in a leadership position, did not report any social skill benefits to his personal life. However, Koščo is the oldest respondent and plays WoW the shortest. While other interviewees have approximately ten years of WoW experience, he joined only a year ago. He even stated that his social skills are primarily derived from work, in which he has to manage and communicate with people. This suggests the positive correlation between years of playing WoW, and acquiring social skills. All players started playing WoW in their early teenage years, and thus might have benefited from being a part of a cooperative, communal environment from an early age. Even though Koščo did not benefit by gaining skills, he states that WoW can be an important place for learning them;

> *Schools do not teach any management, leadership, social or soft skills. They teach children to be individualistic since everyone has their own grades. However, in WoW, people definitely have an opportunity to learn these skills and then practise various social roles as adults. After all, from childhood we are learning knowledge through games and this is the same.* (Koščo, 33)

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The topic of learning different social roles from childhood through games was also brought up by my academic consultant, František Gyarfáš. He remarks that playing games decreases as we grow up, and is even considered unacceptable. However, when we decrease our play, we also decrease our ability to fulfill various social roles. My other academic consultant, Juraj Malíček, likewise pointed out that adults who play games are considered to be 'weirdos', but MMORPGs can be considered as *''alternatives for education and essentially applied preparation for life''*. He also remarks that games are by default used for recreation, and the true definition of recreation is 'redefining oneself'. Thus, people are able to 'redefine' - learn new social roles, skills and even find out new things about themselves, as in the instance of Runebreaks who learnt he enjoys the role of leadership.

All of the presented arguments suggest a conclusion that through virtual shared space, cooperative environments that reinforce trust and cooperation and possibilities of different character customization, guild roles or leadership positions, people are able to benefit by learning to fulfill various social roles and acquire social skills.

SOCIAL TIES

For active WoW players, it is essentially inevitable to create either bridging on bonding ties through the guild. Respondents that did not mention social skills as benefit of guild membership, on the other hand, highlighted creating new ties and even years of lasting friendships. Guilds in general, are most often found bridging social ties. However, through daily communication, cooperation based on reciprocity and mutual trust, it is possible that some players eventually strengthen their relationships and create bonding ties. For guilds formed of bonding ties, the same qualities have the potential to strengthen their already established relationships. In the light of my interviews, respondents described three different kinds of social relationships generated through guilds. 1) creation of bridging ties (90%), 2) reinforcement of bonding ties (60%) and 3) transformation of bridging to bonding ties (40%). None of the respondents currently belonged to the strong-tied guild, however, 60% joined the weak-tied guild with someone they knew from the offline world.

Guilds (if not formed by a group of friends) are created from bridging social ties and hence have the potential to create bridging social capital. Through the lens of Putnam's theory, bridging social networks provides members with 'we-ness', collective action, reciprocity and broader information flow (1993, 200). As described in the subchapter regarding *Guilds*[18], all of these are to be found in them as well. Meanwhile, Putnam criticized CMC as not sufficient enough to build social capital, he also mentioned its benefits including connectedness of people from wider backgrounds that provide richer resources of information (2000). These benefits were remarked upon by interviewees as the social network benefits of belonging to the guild.

> *Guild mainly benefited me with a new and broad social network. You can meet different people, which is very useful because you never know who you will meet. It can be an engineer or architect who can help you with building a house in the future. I, as a financial advisor, can for example help people with insurance.* (Etysha, 20)

Guild indeed exposes you to a wide range of people. *''You are introduced to people you would never meet otherwise. It is as if 20 different people from all around the world met in a pub. That would not happen in reality.'* (Neroc, 24). Of course, the expanse of a player's potential social networks depends on whether they join a national or international guild. Out of interviews, 30% were currently in an international guild, while 50% in 'national' (Czechoslovak) guild, and two respondents left guild just recently[19]. According to answers from interviews, the only difference in regards to the quality of bridging social networks was that players from international guilds were also exposed to different races and nationalities of people. However, as Crassula (25) says *''you do not really care about others' nationality, because it does not matter where you are from. What matters is how you behave as a person''.* As mentioned throughout this chapter, when players prove their trustworthiness, continued cooperation and relationships can be reinforced. If players establish these, they are able to benefit from bridging social networks or even create new strong relationships.

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[18] Subchapter starts on page 32

[19] Mainly due to reasons described in *Unfortunate Game Strategy: Changes Impacting WoW Community* on page 31

Strong ties in guilds are established through continual communication or group play.. It is usual for guild members to exchange conversations while waiting for dungeons or raids. Players talk about the game but also their personal lives (Taylor, 2006). Accordingly, 40% of respondents found long standing friendships which are active until now. *'' I found my biggest sweethearts here, they are the closest people in my life. We have seen each other a few times and even if we do not text for a longer time, when we turn on WoW and join Discord again, it feels as if no time passed. I view them as my brothers ''* (Etysha, 20). Etysha said these friendships are seven years old, and supported her in difficult times of her life. She also stated; *''I definitely have more friends online than in real life''.* Despite being an introvert, she describes herself as more extroverted in guilds, mainly because she feels more relaxed. In this instance, Garrlus (23) who also described himself also as an introvert says; *''My job is essentially about communicating and solving problems with strangers. Guild improved my communication skills and thus, it makes my work more comfortable and less stressful''.* This might suggest that for introverts, people with social anxiety or neurodivergent people on the autism spectrum, CmC may allow them to feel less stressed in social interactions since it might be more difficult for them to communicate in the real world. They can derive benefits from social capital in the game. Garrlus (23) as the only respondent admits he feels addicted to the game. However, the reason is not the game itself, but the community he built there. *''I have great friends there, one of them is even going to help me move out soon''* (Garlus, 23). Neroc (25), likewise as Garrlus claims; *''Yes I am addicted, but not to WoW or games, but to the people and community that is in there''.* Through the guild, he established over ten stable friendships, and with four of those lasting for over ten years. *''I even am a godfather to one of my guild friends' children''* (Neroc, 25). Likewise, Etysha (21), Taryska (26) and Garrlus (23), said they found approximately ten good friendships across the years. Due to the community nature of guilds, players are exposed to each other's behavior easily, and depending on their evaluation, further extend their relationships. Despite using CMC, players can create their social networks that are by mutual trust and continual communication transformed into strong relationships. And as in the real world, strong ties can provide players with emotional, social or material support (Coleman, 1988).

The final occurring element, mostly mentioned by the respondents who joined guilds with already existent social ties, refers to shared space and shared experiences. *''I have*

great memories from one summer when I extensively played with my friends. We were discovering the land, fighting in dungeons and raids.. these shared experiences really improved our friendship'' (Kuroikokoro, 21). Respondents state that they continue to recall memories to each other shared during the gameplay. *''While others talk about their memories from vacation, we recall our adventures and accomplishments in the game. We refer to it as any other experiences from real life.. we share collective emotions and experiences''* (Rjú, 29). Tarysha, likewise adds; *''It is as when a group of friends meets for a beer, we meet in WoW and go fight in a dungeon''* (Tarysha, 26). Through collective play, shared virtual space and experiences, players can reinforce their existing relationships. Despite the lack of FtF contact, these recollected memories are as important for friendships as real life memories. To briefly reflect on the ongoing pandemic situation, based on the interview's descriptions, sustaining friendships through WoW can be regarded as a great substitute for the lack of FtF communication. When questioned about isolation, 70% of interviews confirmed that the community in WoW helped them to satisfy their need for socialization, mainly during lockdowns.

Interviewees' responses seem to confirm the idea that guilds can provide players with both bridging and bonding social ties. Due to the shared space and shared experiences, the communal environment of the guild and the continual communication, its members can create new social relations or reinforce existing ones. Bridging ties acquired through the guild benefit players with a wider scope of resources, due to the range of social networks, unlikely to be created in their personal lives. Bonding social ties, same as in the real world, provide individuals with social as well as psychological support, and of course new close friendships. In addition, it is suggested that guilds can be very beneficial for introverted individuals, who struggle to extend their social capital and learn social skills offline, or as a supplement for social activity in times of ongoing isolation.

4. Concluding Remarks

This case study presents an integrative view of the World of Warcraft long-term associations — guilds, and their members through the sociological and socio-psychological point of view. In this study, guilds are analyzed through the lens of social capital theory, which regards *trust, reciprocity and cooperation* as its main building blocks. The guilds in WoW are following the same fundamental building principles, with addition of regular communication, and common goals. The WoW guilds examined in this study are therefore perceived as micro-societies. The primary question of this thesis asks whether membership in the guilds builds their members' social capital. Following the results of the self-conducted qualitative research interviews with the Czech and Slovak guild members, it can be concluded that one's membership in a guild builds an individual's social capital either in the form of obtaining social skills or creating bridging and bonding social ties. Due to the limitations of qualitative research, these findings cannot be presented as general claims. Rather, their aim is to shed light on an individual's experiences, and begin to fill the social research gap in this topic in the region of the Czech and Slovak Republics.

Building on the social capital definitions outlined by Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam, along with the guidance of Hyyppa's definition, this study shows the inner dynamics of guilds through the social capital lense. For a better understanding of the concept of social capital and its application onto guilds, the first part of this study delineates its theoretical underpinnings and definitions, explains the key concepts of reciprocity, trust and cooperation as well as the creation and benefits of bridging and bonding social ties, and last but not least, it explores CMC communication. With further support of the interview data, the empirical part of the study examines and analyzes how cooperation, reciprocity, and trust in guilds are reinforced by the regular communication and interaction, common goals, feeling of ''we-ness'', shared space and shared experiences. The interviewees extensively described their experiences from their guild memberships and reflected on the impacts these experiences have had on their real lifes.

Despite the qualitative research limitations, this study confirmed its hypothesis and brought significant findings into the light. According to the interview responses, while being in a guild, 90% of the respondents created bridging social ties, 60% reinforced

their existing bonding ties, 40% created bonding ties and 50% benefited by learning social skills. Thus, overall 90% of the respondents build their social capital by participating in a WoW guild membership. These contributions demonstrate that, in spite of the negative perception of online video games, playing an online game can bring various benefits to the real life of their players. The findings might suggest that during times when we are not able to build our social capital in the real world, multiplayer online videogames, in this case the WoW guilds, can be viewed as an alternative variant to social participation and social connection. This is especially significant, due to the ongoing pandemic that isolates people and reduces face to face contact. In addition, the WoW guilds can provide a space for the building of social capital for people who struggle with FtF communication such as, introverted people, people with social anxiety or neurodivergent people on the autistic spectrum. For them, CMC communication can be less stressful, more comfortable and thus, in the communal environments of the guilds, they can derive social capital benefits from the game.

Through the lens of social capital, and its main building blocks of reciprocity, trust and cooperation, this study provided applications of sociological theory on the community essence of the WoW guilds. In the empirical part, we at first applied social capital concepts onto the WoW guilds, and then, with the usage of qualitative research interviews, we examined what social capital benefits the guilds can provide to its members. The presented results sketched out a solid ground for future research, which could be organized on a larger scale with a higher number of participants from diverse backgrounds, to increase its reliability. Further on, it would be interesting to investigate the influence of a guild's membership on the building of social capital of introverts, people with social anxiety or neurodivergent people on the autistic spectrum.

Resumé

Táto prípadová štúdia skúma vplyv online herných priestorov pre viacerých hráčov (označované ako MMORPG), na sociálny kapitál ich hráčov. Špecifiky, sa zameriava na MMORPG hru World of Warcraft, a jej dlhodobé herné skupiny vytvorené hráčmi — guildy. Cieľom tejto práce bolo preskúmať, či vďaka komunitej podstate guild, vedia jej členovia čerpať benefity sociálneho kapitálu.

Teoretický základ tejto štúdie čerpá z troch definícií sociálneho kapitálu od Bourdieuva, Colemana a Putnama. Spoločne s definíciou sociálneho kapitálu od Hyyppä, ktorá slúži ako dodatočná sumarizujúca definícia benefitov sociálneho kapitálu, je tento koncept aplikovaný na vnútornú dynamiku WoW guild. Základná esencia sociálneho kapitálu, tak isto ako aj guild, leží v dôvere, vzájomnosti, kooperácii a následnom tvorení sociálnych väzieb. Spoločne s častou komunikáciou, pocitom spolupatričnosti, a sledovaním spoločných cieľov, sú guildy potencionálnym miestom pre tvorenie sociálneho kapitálu.

V prvej kapitole, ktorá je teoreticky zameraná, autor prechádza cez tri spomínané základné definície sociálneho kapitálu a vysvetľuje, ako títo teoretici rozumejú tvorbe dôvery, vzájomnosti, kooperácie a sociálnych väzieb. Následne opisuje kritiku tohto konceptu, pre celistvý obrázok o limitáciach tejto teórie. Ďalej však zahŕňa benefity, ktoré sociálny kapitál môže ľuďom priniesť. Napojené na benefity autor ďalej opisuje ako sa kľúčové koncepty vzájomnosti, dôvery a kooperácie vyskytujú pri tvorení sociálnych pút a ako sa medzi sebou ovplyvňujú. V kontexte týchto konceptov opisuje vytváranie samotných sociálnych väzieb, ktoré sa rozdeľujú do tkz. bonding (silných) a bridging (slabých).

V druhej kapitole autor opisuje metodológiu, ktorá bola použitá v tomto výskume. Údaje pre tento výskum boli zhromaždené cez pološtruktúrované rozhovory s českými a slovenskými členmi WoW guild, ktorí reflektovali na ich skúsenosti v guilde. V Českej republike a na Slovensku neexistujú údaje týkajúce sa online hier vo vzťahu k budovaniu sociálneho kapitálu. Táto štúdia teda vypĺňa túto prázdnu medzeru a prináša údaje, na ktorých môže budúci výskum stavať.

V tretej, empirickej kapitole, autor diskutuje o aplikáciách sociálneho kapitálu na World of Warcraft a guildy. Autor používa získané dáta ako primárne a s pomocou sekundárnych zdrojov aplikuje koncepty sociálneho kapitálu na guildy a jej členov. Cez odpovede respondentov autor ukazuje ako v guildach funguje dôvera, vzájomnosť, kooperácia, sociálne väzby, a ich celková dynamika. Takisto rozoberá ako môžu vďaka spomínaným prvkom hráči získať výhody sociálneho kapitálu vrátane zručností a sociálnych väzieb.

Výsledky štúdie naznačujú, že aktívny členovia guildy si vedia budovať nové zručnosti, vzťahy a dokonca posilňovať svoje existujúce priateľstvá. Tieto dáta by bolo byť zaujímavé podrobnejšie preskúmať, najmä vzhľadom na prebiehajúcu pandémiu, ktorá núti ľudí k izolácii a znižovaniu osobného kontaktu.

List of Expert Interviews

Mgr. Juraj Malíček, PhD.

Juraj Malíček, who is a leading expert on pop-culture studies, provided me with understanding the videogame communities from a philosophical point of view. His insights helped me to understand how important it is for people to play games, because as he said, games provide us with recreation, and recreation itself means ''redefining oneself''.

Ing. František Gyárfáš, PhD.

František Gyárfáš, is currently a professor at Comenius University in the study department of artificial intelligence. His background in the field of philosophy of the Internet provided me with rich insights on the understanding of virtual spaces.

Tomáš Mališka, MA

Tomáš studied at Bratislava School of Liberal Arts with a major in sociology, and further pursued a master in sociology at Masaryk University. Tomáš, as a gamer himself, provided me with his personal experiences through the sociological lens. His insights helped me to connect Bourieu's definition of social capital in my study.

Appendix

List of personal interviews:

Crassula

Slovak, man, 25 years old, plays WoW for ten years

Etysha

Czech, woman, 21 years old, plays WoW for nine years

Garrlus

Czech, man, 23 years old, plays WoW for ten years

Koščo

Slovak, man, 33 years old, plays WoW for one year

Kuroikokoro

Slovak, woman, 21 years old, plays WoW for six years

Neroc

Slovak, man, 24 years old, plays WoW for ten years

Runebreakes

Slovak, man, 20 years old, plays WoW for ten years

Taryska

Slovak, woman, 26 years old, plays WoW for ten years

Zarthyn

Czech, man, 20 years old, plays WoW for eight years

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