Communication in Overwatch

Christal Toh (U1830172L)

1. Introduction

Overwatch is a multiplayer First Person Shooter (FPS) online that pits players against other players using in-game characters known as "heroes", and is developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment. Overwatch is an extremely popular game, garnering at least 40 million new players since its launch in 2016 (Gough, 2019). Games are predominantly used for entertainment, but can also be used for social functions and have the ability to deeply impact the language used in the game, which will be discussed further in the essay.

The game has two different communication systems that can be used on its own or simultaneously by players. The first communication system is the game's messaging system, or in other words the "chat box". It largely resembles messaging systems found in SNS (Social Networking Systems) and is text-based (Figure 1). The second communication system is the game's in-built voice system. This resembles phone conversations because players can have voiced conversations with one another without being able to see each other's faces, and is speech-based (Figure 2). Players can select their desired target addressee from a large pool of audiences, but most use only three of them - group, team and chat.

Figure 1: Chat box

Figure 2: Voice system

2. Relevant Literature

A study was conducted to investigate the reasons for the attraction of gaming and how social activities can be influenced by online gaming (Wu, Wang & Tsai, 2010). Based on the study's results, it was concluded that players have frequent social interactions with others and exchange information with one another using the game's systems. This means that games, including Overwatch, can be viable methods of communication. The study is further reinforced experiences of interviewees, whereby the experiences solidified the fact that communication systems in games can fuel collaboration and other forms of social activities among individuals and other communities within games. However, despite the different types of social interaction that games can bring, communication within games is still a propeller for discrimination and toxicity. Communities that are built from these games are innately discriminatory and toxic, as

evident from the study done on Geguri, a female professional gamer. She was accused of cheating by male-dominated communities and had to go through many lengths to prove otherwise. The accusations made towards her were largely sexist in its language (Slaker & Ahmad, 2019). Hence, while Overwatch can be a good medium for communication to encourage online social interaction, some of it can be negative.

3. Modes of communication Overwatch has reinforced

In general, Overwatch does not enable a new kind of communication, but rather, reinforces specific modes of communication that exist in the past and present. One such specific mode of communication is military language. When comparing both Overwatch and the military, there are many similarities. One similarity is that there have been many new jargon that were created to use in Overwatch itself, and such is the case for military language as well. To others, the jargon of each mode of communication may be confusing, but players and soldiers easily understand the respective jargon used by one another (Friedman, 2016). In both Overwatch and the military, team coordination is of utmost importance for a higher chance of victory, and it is said that such jargon can lead to effective communication that is crucial for teamwork (Achille, Schulze & Schimdt-Nielsen, 2009).

4. General Effects of Overwatch on society

The game promotes interaction among players by having well-built communication systems inside the game, which impacts social activities in society. One of the systems in Overwatch, the chat box, greatly resembles the messaging systems that most SNS have. Therefore, the Overwatch messaging system can be considered an enabler of online conversations. Some of the motivations to use popular SNS like Twitter and Facebook were discovered to be 'expressive information sharing and social interaction' (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011). Because the messaging system in Overwatch is so similar to that of SNS, these listed motivations also relate to the game. The listed motivations, 'expressive information sharing' and 'social interaction', correlates well with how social activities are created by Overwatch. One, which in this case, are players in Overwatch (Razmerita, Kirchner, & Nielsen, 2016). This means that in between matches, sharing information with other players through the messaging system, be it information about the game or their daily lives, can motivate people to continue playing the game and develop more friendships with others at the same time. A cycle is created because when bonds are strengthened among the players, they want to play more and use the messaging system more to make more friends and share information, and then even more bonds are created and strengthened. Overwatch allows people to meet and develop online relationships without ever knowing each other's appearances, and possibly even their voices if they choose not to reveal it.

Another way that Overwatch impacts society is that people can obtain almost immediate feedback from the numerous communities surrounding the game itself. There are different communities of Overwatch built across popular online platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Twitch. Blizzard Entertainment makes an effort to support these communities surrounding Overwatch. They are built based on the Overwatch League, Youtube and Twitch streamers' fans, as well as forums. These communities are very big and active because of the popularity of the game and the amount of people playing it. For instance, Dafran, a well-known Twitch streamer and former professional player for Atlanta Reign in the Overwatch League, has a large community of 540,000 (Dafran, 2020). Large, responsive communities enable people to gain almost immediate feedback or answers to questions pertaining to the game. This "facilitates better learner engagement and thereby better recall and retention" (Mulkeen, n.d), so players can improve their skills in

the game or expand their knowledge about Overwatch through almost instantaneous feedback and answers from online communities.

Moreover, Blizzard Entertainment constantly increases awareness of diversity in society though Overwatch, exposing its players to heroes of different walks of life. Most other games lack diversity because game companies usually target white men, so there is often a severe lack of representation for women and black people. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transexuals and queers (LGBTQ) are also hardly represented in mainstream games. However, Blizzard Entertainment has made a commitment to continue increasing representation of diverse characters in their games and this can be easily observed in Overwatch. There are many female heroes with impressive occupations such as scientist, architect and hacker. All heroes are of different nationalities like Indian, Japanese, Swiss and German, a recent addition to the game being Baptiste who is a Haitian man. The LGBTQ is also represented in Overwatch, with Tracer, one of the most popular female heroes in the game, being in a canon relationship with another female. All these representations allow players to expand their knowledge about the differences between people in society and learn more about different cultures and identities within society.

5. Properties of Overwatch that affect language

As a popular multiplayer game, Overwatch has many different properties that impact the online social activities of individual players. The language used for communication can be affected in many different ways due to these properties.

Firstly, due to the fast-paced nature of the game, there is often a need for efficient ways of communicating. When using the chat box during a match, players only have about 1-2 seconds to type a message. Otherwise, they risk hampering one's team or getting killed by the opposing team. Thus, players frequently use acronyms and abbreviations in messages while using the chat box because they make communication easier and faster (Randall, 2002). This is exactly the type of communication that players need in the fast-paced environment of the game. New abbreviations and acronyms in Overwatch are constantly being created, and existing ones are also used. One example of a created acronym for the game is GOATS (Greatest of All Times), for a specific team composition in the game (Overwatch Wiki, 2020). Based on Randall's (2002) research, the rampant use of acronyms and abbreviations will not affect the players' language proficiencies either.

This fast-paced nature of Overwatch also severely changes the sentence structures in conversations that take place using communication systems in the game. The nature of the game forces players to incorporate effectiveness while communicating. According to Wang (2003), an effective sentence requires qualities of "clarity and emphasis". Therefore most of the time when conversing, sentences are severely shortened for improved clarity because players need to be direct and precise so that they can be clear and easily understood by other players. At times, a whole sentence can even be reduced to a single word. This word can be repeated many times for emphasis and also carry its original meaning. For instance, in Figure 3, the players in the match are repeatedly saying "Rein", the name of one of the heroes in Overwatch, in order to emphasize the need to kill the enemy who is using that hero. This is more time-efficient than saying "Please kill the opposing enemy tank immediately" because of the fast-paced nature of the game.

Figure 3: Use of a repeatedly emphasized word in the voice system

One of the game's other properties is its diverse community of players. There is always a chance to pair up with skilful players or 'trolls', people who intentionally ruin game experiences for players. This is where the game's endorsement and reporting systems make an impact in the game. The game's endorsement system allows players to 'praise' another player anonymously after a match, allowing both sides to earn in-game rewards.
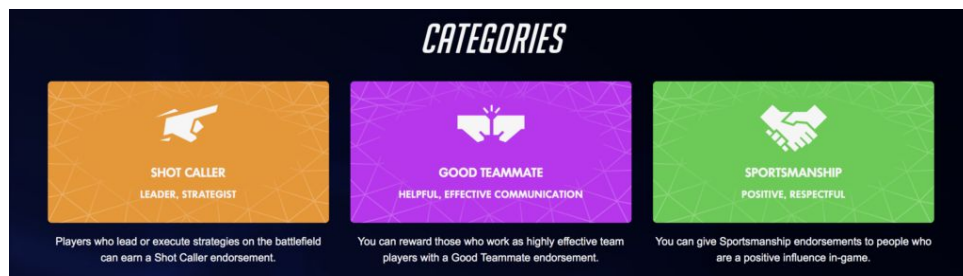

Figure 4: Endorsement System

The game's reporting system allows players to report a player directly to the moderators of the game anonymously, and the reported player will get either a suspension or ban if the report proves to be true after verification.

Figure 4: Report System

According to Schwencke (2017), one reason as to why people do not report hate crime is an inherent fear of retaliation from the perpetrator. The anonymity of the systems - especially the report system - will

make people more inclined to use them often due to a sense of safety arising from anonymity (O'Dowd, 2006). This then promotes self-censorship whereby players will think twice about what they say in game because they will want to be 'praised' more for rewards and 'reported' less to avoid punishments. Conversations among players include less toxic language, such as less swearing, trash-talking and discriminatory language, after both systems were put in the game to operate simultaneously, as accounted for by many online players of Overwatch.

6. General effects of Overwatch on communication

There are also other general effects that Overwatch can bring to language.

When playing Overwatch, different environments are created from the language styles that players use. Using positive words in one's language can "change mood, behavior and physical well-being" because it stimulates the brain and is "responsible for getting people to take action" (Himmelman, 2018). This can work for negative language as well. Because the game is played by so many different kinds of people, at times, players will meet nice people who use positive language, and mean people who use negative language. Players who use positive language in the game like "Nice shot!" spur encouragement and optimism, making others more motivated to win the match. Other players will also begin to commend and praise each other, thereby creating a pleasant environment. On the flipside, players who use negative language in the game like "Stop dying!" are common and usually find blame with others. This leads to other people retaliating with negative language as well, creating a toxic and pessimistic environment.

Majority of people that play Overwatch are men, therefore the language that is used by most while playing the game is laced with toxic masculinity. A lot of sexist and homophobic speech exist in the language, and it is also filled with vulgarities and toxicity. Female players are afraid of revealing their own gender because of this, as it has been reported that female players receive rape threats and other forms of sexual harassment in Overwatch (Payne, 2018). The language used in Overwatch therefore casts the game in a negative light.

Overwatch also enables non-verbal communication. Players can also use Overwatch's command system to communicate (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Overwatch's command system

Non-verbal communication is achieved by the command system through a series of commands and emotes that the player's selected hero performs in-game. For instance, when activating the "Hello!"

command, the player's hero does the greeting along with waving their hands, without the actual player having to type or say 'Hello'. One of the commands also contains in-game emotes that resemble modern day emojis, whereby society is "effectively replacing full sentences with emoji to convey the same meaning" (Passariello, 2015). These emotes serve the same purpose and can replace full sentences to convey the same meaning as well. For example, the 'applaud' emote can replace sentences like "that was a good job!". These commands and emotes can therefore constitute as its own language within the game.

7. Seven Features by Crystal

To compare whether Overwatch is more speech-like or text-like in terms of its characteristics, the seven features as introduced by Crystal (2006) will be used.

Firstly, when looking at whether mediums are time-bound or space-bound (Bond, 2014), communication in Overwatch is time bound. Although the game stores chat logs in one of its file directories, the messages received while playing the game disappear after a while to receive more incoming messages, thus making the messaging system transient and dynamic. Players will need to reply to messages before they disappear, so Overwatch is time-bound. Similarly, player speech is not actively recorded and cannot be replayed, thus there is a need to reply instantly like in a normal conversation when using the voice system. Both the messaging system and voice system also allow players to switch target audiences (Overwatch Wiki, 2020) and deliberately pick the people they want to talk to, so the conversations between speaker and its intended addressees are direct.

Secondly, with regards to spontaneity (Bond, 2014), Overwatch has more speech-like characteristics. During matches, there is usually no lag between production and reception of messages and speech because of the fast-paced nature of the game and players need to respond immediately in order to win the match. Also, it is not possible to plan complex sentences during a match. Acronyms and abbreviations are constantly used, and sentences are severely shortened for effective communication. Sentence boundaries are not distinct as well because players need not respond systematically. Player speech can overlap and messages can be sent simultaneously among many people, so nobody can control the exact time that the speaker's intended addresses reply.

Thirdly, regarding visual contextualization (Bond, 2014), Overwatch holds more face-to-face characteristics and thus leans towards speech-like features. Extralinguistic cues are common because many gestures, body language and facial expressions can be replaced by commands and emotes in the game itself. Although the actual faces and bodies of players cannot be seen by one another, the selected hero in the game acts as a substitute for the player in terms of these extralinguistic cues. The instantaneous nature of Overwatch also means that deictic expressions are common because situations and conversations are happening in real time.

Moreover, on the matter of structure (Bond, 2014), Overwatch is loosely structured and therefore more speech-like. Contractions such as "isn't" is common because sentences are severely reduced in their length for effective communication, and "isn't" is quicker to type or say than "is not". Informal vocabulary is also widely used by players since it allows the pace of conversations to be quicker (Emily, 2018), which is much needed in a fast-paced game. Obscenity is also common because toxic masculinity is common in the language used in Overwatch.

Next, Overwatch is socially interactive among its players, and thus has more speech-like features. Prosody can be observed when players stress and emphasize certain words to get other players to take

action. There are many non-verbal features that exist in the game as well, such as emotes and commands, that can convey certain messages across to another player. Because there is no filter in the game's voice system and for most messages in the chat box, players can usually talk about anything to others, so they can easily maintain their online relationships and express their own positive or negative attitudes and opinions. These features thus make Overwatch well suited to social functions.

Furthermore, in terms of revisability (Bond, 2014), communication in Overwatch leans more towards speech-like characteristics, but incorporates a certain text-like feature as well. Nothing in conversations that take place in Overwatch can be withdrawn. When using the voice system, players cannot retract voiced speech once a sentence is uttered. When using the chat box, sentences cannot be deleted once sent. Interruptions and overlaps are also common in both systems because players can simultaneously talk or type messages without a systematic structure. However, because conversations in both systems occur in real-time, errors can be both immediately and repeatedly revisable. Players can correct their previous uttered sentence immediately and repeatedly until they get the point across. In messages, players can also correct themselves immediately and repeatedly by using astrids. It is understood that astrids serve a purpose of correcting textual messages in previous messages, so the revision is immediate. Astrids can also be repeatedly used until the user is satisfied with the current revision.

Finally, Overwatch is both prosodically rich and graphically rich in terms of communication within the game. When the in-built voice system is used, conversations are rich in prosody. Words are stressed for emphasis and urgency so that the directed addressee can take immediate action, and loudness of voices are prevalent when people get excited (Rachelle, 2017) by turns of events in the game. When the messaging system is used, messages include capitalization of words or sentences, as well as punctuation. Capitalization is frequently used to get one's point across and for emphasis (Gallucci, 2019), and punctuation are used to evoke certain emotions (Passariello, 2015). These features in messages help to replace speech-like characteristics in the game when players choose not to use the voice system.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Overwatch is a very useful medium of communication because it offers a variety of features that can enable social activities among people and deeply impact the use of language among players. Text-like and speech-like characteristics of Overwatch were compared on the basis of seven features by David Crystal. While Overwatch has some text-like characteristics, its speech-like characteristics are more dominant in the medium.

9. References

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