

In-game marriage and computer-mediated collaboration: An exploratory study of *Audition*

Guo Zhang and Susan C. Herring

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

Abstract

This exploratory study discusses how in-game marriage can affect (and effect) Multiplayer Online Game (MOG) players' collaborative behaviors through an analysis of *Audition*, a non-violent, non-fantasy dance battle MOG which mediates and facilitates couple-related collaborative behaviors. On the basis of a content analysis of couple-related screenshots (including chat logs, dance battle scenarios, and couple behaviors) collected from in-game participant observation (n=126) and an out-game public game forum (n=304), three non-exclusive themes related to couple-mediated collaboration in *Audition* are identified and discussed. This study points to the importance of taking gender (and sexual orientation) into account when analyzing participation in, and the dynamics of, MOG play. In a broader sense, the study of the connection between collaboration and intimacy in MOGs sheds light on the role of digital media in shaping personal relationships.

Keywords

collaboration; dance; gender; in-game marriage; multiplayer online game; sexual orientation

Introduction and background

Multiplayer Online Games (MOGs) provide software platforms that “encourage sophisticated collaboration [...] in a way that players find fulfilling” (Pace et al., 2010, p. 233) via computer-mediated and avatar-mediated communication. Previous research (e.g., Nova, 2002) has shown that in-game collaboration tends to be task-driven and functional: Players collaborate because it is imperative for success in the game, both for winning battles and for “leveling up” their avatars. Moreover, in-game collaboration is prototypically large-scale and highly organized, as illustrated by *World of Warcraft (WoW)* guilds (e.g., Williams et al., 2006) and raiding (Bardzell et al., 2012). In contrast, although intimate, affection-driven, and small-scale collaborations also occur in MOGs, including collaborations mediated via romantic relationships, they have been much less studied. One example is in-game marriage.

Historically, in-game marriage has its roots in cyber marriage in text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Domains), a predecessor of MOGs. In the virtual weddings studied by Curtis (1997), in-game marriage represented a serious commitment that often extended into “real-life.” Other researchers have characterized in-game marriage as part of the playful game experience (e.g., Wu et al., 2007). Gender stereotypes exist (e.g., only males are supposed to propose marriage; females accept or not), but in-game marriage can also “shake binary gender roles” (Wu et al., p. 87) due to gender switching and the performative nature of gender in the game (Li et al., 2008). Some studies have addressed fantasy MOG players' intimate in-game experiences in general (e.g., Pace et al., 2010), and others have considered how players' online romances impact their offline relationships (e.g., Kolotkin et al., 2012). However, none of these studies focuses on collaborative online gaming environments.

Methods

This study asks: How does in-game marriage affect (and effect) MOG players' collaborative behaviors, and relatedly, how does packaging strategic collaboration as an interpersonal relationship facilitate that partnership's evolution to an emotional connection? It addresses these questions through an exploratory analysis of *Audition*, a dance battle game released in South Korea in 2004, launched in the United States in 2008, and which now attracts more than 300 million players worldwide. *Audition*

is a non-violent, non-fantasy MOG, with colorful designs, cute avatars, and a popular marriage system (see below) that mediates and facilitates couple-related collaborative behaviors. In contrast with previously studied MOGs such as *WoW*, which tend to be male dominated, *Audition* has a balanced gender distribution among its players (female: 48.6%; male: 48.1%; unknown: 3.3%¹); thus, it is an especially appropriate MOG in which to study marriage, which is overwhelmingly heterosexual, both in MOGs and in mainstream society. More and more MOGs are developing marriage systems to enhance players' playful and immersive experiences (Lo, 2009; Wu et al., 2007). In contrast to the "particularly masculine pursuit" (Selwyn, 2007, p. 533) of violent and/or fantasy-based games (e.g., *WoW*) (see Figure 1), these games (e.g., *Dance Online*, *Dance Groove Online*, *HighStreet 5*) constitute a growing game industry that attracts many female as well as some gay male players.



Figure 1: Login screens of *Audition* and *WoW* (as of January 2013)

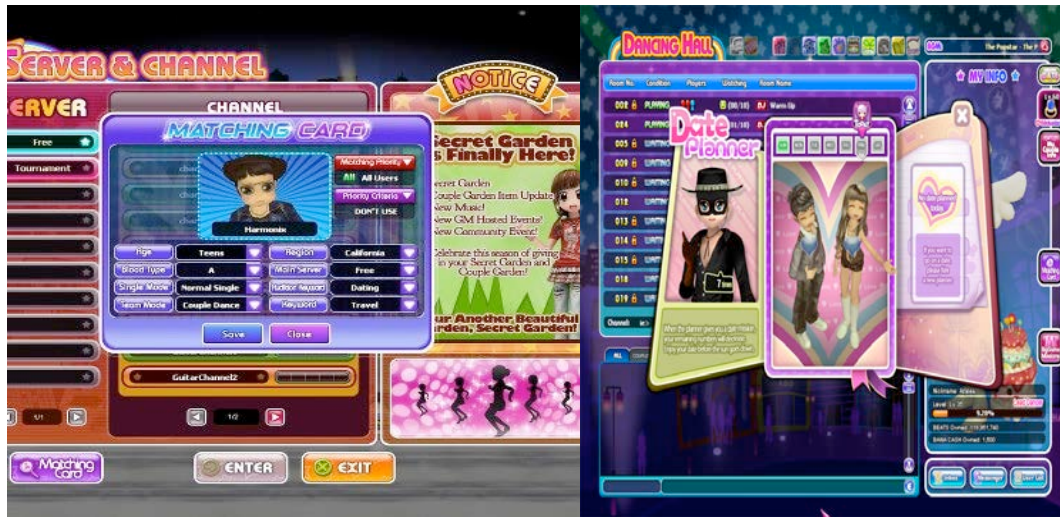
Some couple-related communication is private (e.g., via a private messaging system in the game), but players often publicly self-document their communication and behavior. For this study, we collected all screenshots (n=304) capturing couples' in-game chat logs, dance battle scenarios, and couple behaviors that players had voluntarily uploaded to the official, largest, and most popular English-language out-game public game forum in the U.S. (forums.redbana.com) between 2008 and December 2012. Not all couples upload their data to the forum, and some post only text; thus, the screenshots do not represent all couple behavior. To address this limitation, the first author also collected data via in-game participant observation (logged in from a North American server) and video recording in January and February 2013, and couple-related snapshots (n=126) were extracted from the recorded video. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we conducted a content analysis of these data and identified three non-exclusive themes related to couple-mediated collaboration: romance-driven, in-battle and out-battle, and in-game and out-game collaboration.

Romance-driven collaboration

The process of seeking collaborators in *Audition* is often romance-driven, rather than task-driven. That is, players collaborate not only to win dance battles, but to develop potential romantic relationships, where romance is defined according to Sternberg's (1986) typology of love relationships as showing high intimacy and high passion (emotion). *Audition* players can form an ad hoc couple when they join a "couple mode" battle simply by sending a coupling request to a member's avatar of the opposite gender² in the "room." However, to pursue long-term collaborative relationships, players tend to use the game's marriage system. This includes matching cards (Figure 2a) to search for potential "dance partners," a date planner (Figure 2b), and weddings (Figure 2c) to officially become a couple with a love license (Figure 2d). They may also use an out-game platform to find a "perfect" match.

¹ Source: Redbana.com

² In one forum thread, a gay male player requested a same-sex coupling. The forum manager suggested that he either choose a female avatar or just form a "friendship couple."



a. A matching card

b. A date planner



c. A wedding

d. A love license

Figure 2: Coupling activities mediated by *Audition* features

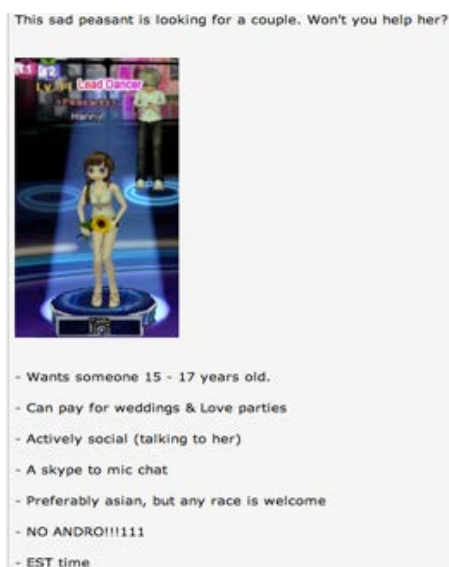


Figure 3: A female player's forum post seeking a partner

Figure 3 shows a screenshot of a female player's forum post seeking a partner, indicating that high sociability (being constantly online and engaging with each other) and communication (via Skype, shared language) are her main criteria for coupling. The decision to couple is also made based on personality attraction (e.g., hobbies, religion, and background, as listed in matching cards) and on "inner feelings" and "intangible souls" (Lo, 2009, p. 394), rather than on skill (e.g., levels, dancing skills, leadership, experience). As in "real-life" relationships, establishing such collaboration is time consuming: Players typically devote significant time to developing mutual trust, dependence, and emotional affiliation. In this process, explanations, arguments, expressions of affection, and confessions may occur.

In-battle and out-battle collaboration

Audition is designed as a dance battle game. Figure 4a shows a successful "couple dance" battle scenario in the "Dancing Hall" (the main in-game location). However, couple-mediated collaboration sometimes extends beyond the game's battle

theme. Figure 4b shows an out-battle collaboration: A couple built a garden together in the “couple farm,” another in-game location. Their chat (depicted in the screen capture) after they finished decorating this garden was also a collaborative activity, based on the lyrics of Carly Rae Jepsen’s popular love song “Call Me Maybe”: One member of the couple typed a line from the song, and the other typed the next line. In this way, they showed both coordination and romantic feeling. Couples also work together to design their clothes, poses, and accessories to construct a “perfectly matched” couple image (Figures 4c, 4d). These activities consume time, energy, and money, but they do not benefit players in terms of game status or levels. The probable motivation is the emotional intensity that the couples feel or seek through the development of a romantic relationship.



a. In-battle dance competition

b. Out-battle garden in farm



c. Out-battle matching clothing and accessories

d. Out-battle matching poses

Figure 4: Examples of in-battle and out-battle couple collaboration

In-game and out-game collaboration

Compared to other MOG collaborations, the collaborations of *Audition* couples are more likely to cross the boundary between the game world and out-game worlds due to their emotional intensity, which can be similar to what is experienced in committed real-life relationships (Kolotkin et al., 2012). Some *Audition* couples post an account of their love story to the public web forum associated with the game, composed of in-game screenshots, real life photos, narratives, cartoons, and decorations. The screenshots in Figure 5 show two examples of *Audition* couples’ out-game romantic collaboration: a co-composed love story and a co-designed forum signature. Moreover, couples’ chat logs indicate that they tend to use other media channels, such as Skype, to communicate outside the game. They also conduct couple-related activities outside the game: For example, one couple scheduled an out-game date—watching Xfinity movies together—while competing with another couple in a dance battle.



a. A love story

b. A forum signature

Figure 5. Examples of *Audition* couples' out-game collaboration

Discussion

Audition is a non-violent, non-fantasy game with many female players; accordingly, collaboration, an activity often claimed to be favored by females, differs between *Audition* and the violent and fantasy games described in previous literature. In particular, the packaging of collaboration in terms of romantic coupling caters to young females' interest in interpersonal relationship formation. To be sure, female gamers likely play as males sometimes so that there will be enough males in the game to form couples with, and some gay male gamers take on the role of females in order to form a couple. However, these gender shifts re-inscribe, rather than call into question, the overall heteronormativity of the game environment. Thus this exploratory study points to the importance of taking gender (and sexual orientation) into account when analyzing participation in, and the dynamics of, MOG play. Since Asian players are very active in *Audition*, it also calls for a deeper investigation of the role of culture in in-game marriage, in that emotional expression can easily be affected by cultural norms.

Audition, like other MOGs, is a designed environment, and its in-game coupling features both guide and support collaboration. Our study suggests that *Audition* players are not passive users of the designed coupling features, however, but rather appropriate those technical features as active creators of sophisticated, emotional computer-mediated collaboration. More generally, the study of the connection between collaboration and intimacy in MOGs can shed light on the role of digital media in shaping personal relationships as discussed by Baym (2010) and Turkle (2011), such as how players develop and maintain romantic relationships that start online, what the characteristics are of their online communication and expressions of affection, and whether their online romances negatively impact their offline relationships.

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