



The Dynamics of Conflict within an Online Gaming Community

Understanding the conflict process in an online gaming setting and what to look out for as a company.

A case on The Elder Scrolls Online gaming community.

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Title: The Dynamics of Conflict within an Online Gaming Community: Understanding the conflict process in an online gaming setting and what to look out for as a company.
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Abstract:

This dissertation aims at taking a deeper look into social interactions within online gaming. Specifically, it explores the dynamics of conflict within the online gaming community of the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game “The Elder Scrolls Online”. A netnographic approach is taken to understand how conflict within such a community emerges and develops. It also addresses how conflict in this online setting can escalate and how players engage in these conflicts. The way in which players associate these conflicts to the company who develops the game is also explored. Data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach. The results describe that conflict within this community is a complex process that emerges whenever a player perceives that another party has frustrated or is about to frustrate a concern of his/her regarding his/her gaming experience. Conflict is then escalated depending on how players engage with each other in regard to that concern. Less cooperative conflict handling styles, group polarizations and magnitude of frustration experienced are observed to lead to conflict escalation. In such situations, players engage in hostility, personal attacks and shaming. While some players attribute their frustration to the company, others see conflicts within the community as socially originating. This dissertation therefore discusses the implications of studying conflicts within online gaming communities and proposes that these communities are an enriching field for the study of conflict as issues tied to the content and context of the game can blend with broader social issues.

Resumo:

Esta dissertação visa olhar mais profundamente as interações sociais dentro de jogos online. Especificamente, explora a dinâmica do conflito dentro da comunidade de jogos on-line do jogo “The Elder Scrolls Online”. Uma abordagem netnográfica é tomada para entender como o conflito dentro de tal comunidade surge e se desenvolve. Também aborda como o conflito nessa configuração online pode aumentar e como os jogadores se envolvem nesses conflitos. A forma como os jogadores associam esses conflitos à empresa que desenvolve o jogo também é explorada. Os dados foram analisados por meio de abordagem temática qualitativa. Os resultados descrevem que o conflito dentro desta comunidade é um processo complexo que surge sempre que um jogador percebe que outra parte frustrou ou está prestes a frustrar uma preocupação dele/dela em relação à sua experiência de jogo. Conflito é então escalado dependendo de como os jogadores se envolvem uns com os outros em relação a essa preocupação. Estilos de abordagem de conflitos menos cooperativos, polarizações de grupo e magnitude de frustração experienciada são observados a levar à escalada de conflitos. Em tais situações, os jogadores apresentam hostilidade. Enquanto alguns jogadores atribuem sua frustração à empresa, outros vêem os conflitos dentro da comunidade como socialmente originários. Esta dissertação, portanto, discute as implicações do estudo de conflitos dentro de comunidades de jogos online e propõe que essas comunidades sejam um campo enriquecedor para o estudo do conflito, pois questões ligadas ao conteúdo e ao contexto do jogo podem se misturar a questões sociais mais amplas.

Keywords: Online Conflict, Conflict Process, Gaming, Retention, Netnography.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem definition and relevance

The global media and entertainment market has consistently been on the rise with a projected growth from an estimated \$1.72 trillion in 2015 to \$2.2 trillion by 2021 in the U.S. alone.

Particularly online gaming, or Social Network Gaming (SNG), is one of the branches that has evolved the most over the past decades. This includes mobile gaming, as well as pay-to-play and free-to-play Massively Multiplayer Online gaming (MMOs). In 2016, MMOs generated around \$19.9 billion in revenues in the U.S. (Statista, 2015). As such, due to its potential, the online gaming industry is worth further exploring.

Even though it seems like an attractive industry, business opportunities do not come without their challenges. Over the years games have evolved and their business models have become more complex.

According to Hamari and Järvinen (2011) game design and business design are becoming linked. As proposed by the authors online games have been run as services, which implies that companies need to acquire new customers for a longer period of time while making sure to retain the acquired players and monetising them via more intricate mechanics (Hamari & Järvinen, 2011). Another relevant factor of the game design – and consequently its perceived enjoyment – is, according to the authors, the social value of these online games: “If we expand the notion of game mechanics to the social value context of social games, then game mechanics can be seen as a particular subcategory of viral marketing techniques. They function as drivers for acquisition and retention in the context of play.” (Hamari & Järvinen, 2011, p.14)

Additionally, in terms of acquisition and retention, as stated by emotion theorists (see Frijda, 1986), and acknowledged by Hamari and Järvinen, emotions give us coping strategies for everyday situations and therefore emotions, or predictions of them, might be the crucial factor in deciding to keep on playing. Fun experiences through play may be therefore seen as a cluster of positive emotions arising from playing with the game, and therefore fun is a motivation for returning to interact with the product.

Studies like the one from Hamari and Järvinen can shed light into how game design and business design are ever more important for succeeding in the online gaming industry. However, most recent research has focused on the study of online gaming from a design perspective, as it is the design that supports social interaction (Järvinen, 2009; Kirman et al., 2010). In contrast, some authors suggest that if one was to dig deeper into the gameplay experience, it is the social element, the way in which players interact with the context and content of the game that determines this experience (Williams, 2006). These social elements can also be associated with positive or negative emotions. Therefore, understanding the way players interact with each other could be an important first step both for conceiving a game as well as maintaining it and its playerbase alive.

A netnography study explored this gap in the literature to uncover the subjective perspective of gamers participating in a dynamic social process and on their day-to-day practices by joining a small community of players from the game Restaurant City over a course of three years. By analyzing online and offline interactions between players, the study revealed the significance of this experience through interactions as well as the significance of the experience in the routine lives of players, both online and offline (Alvarez, Sintas, & Martinez, 2015).

Additionally, the social side of gaming has also been suggested to create online as well as offline social support for players (Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012), further inferring the importance social interaction has on gamers and the importance of looking at social interactions among them within gaming communities.

This dissertation does not seek to contradict the importance of either the linkage between game and business design or of social interaction in gaming, but seeks to further shed light into these social interactions. It acknowledges that those can be a crucial factor for the game and business designs themselves. With the aim to explore these interactions even further, this dissertation proposes to understand the dynamics of conflict within an online gaming community through a netnography study into the case of The Elder Scrolls Online community, based on the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) “The Elder Scrolls Online”(also called ESO).

1.2 Objective and Research Questions

This dissertation seeks to further explore online interactions between players through uncovering and understanding the dynamics of conflict between and among them in a gaming community. In specific, the “Elder Scrolls Online” gaming community, which is owned by Zenimax Online Studios (ZOS), will be explored. As an exploratory study, it seeks to uncover qualitative insights to conceptualize potential reasons or contexts for conflicts within such a community.

Additionally, it seeks to understand how these people behave towards conflict. The following research questions were consequently formed:

Q1: What are the dynamics of conflict within the Online gaming community of “The Elder Scrolls Online”?

In order to understand the dynamics of conflict, the following sub-questions will be addressed and explored:

Q2: How does conflict come about within the community?

Q3: How do people engage in conflict?

Q4: How does conflict escalate?

Q5: How is meaning about ZOS being constructed online?

This question has the purpose to understand what players think of when they talk about ZOS, if the company itself and their actions are associated with conflict in the eyes of players, and if so, how do they link conflict to the company.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis:

The first chapter of this thesis deals with the problem definition and the relevance of the issue being studied.

The following chapter is a literature review on the theories behind conflict. In this chapter, the definition of conflict, studies on how it is handled on a face-to-face setting, how conflict translates to the digital environment and how it is handled online are presented and discussed. As there is a gap in the literature regarding conflicts in online gaming communities, this chapter

serves to contextualize the reader with a systemic view of conflict to lay the ground for the research objectives of this dissertation: the exploration of said gap.

The next chapter is a case study on The Elder Scrolls Online game and its company, Zenimax Online Studios. This chapter serves to contextualize the company with the game and the game itself with its community.

The fourth chapter presents the methodology of this dissertation: netnography. It outlines its strengths and weaknesses as well as why it is a suitable methodology for this study. It also describes how the community was selected and how the data was gathered and analyzed.

The fifth chapter comprises the ethnographic analysis based on the identified themes which emerged from the data. In this chapter the research questions are addressed and insights are developed that help the understanding of the dynamics of conflict within this particular online gaming community.

The sixth chapter of this dissertation deals with the academic and managerial discussions arising from the fifth chapter.

The final chapter deals with the limitations of the study as well as future research that could be conducted based on the insights gathered from this dissertation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conflict Definition

To understand the dynamics of conflict, it is important to firstly define what conflict is. A wide variety of different phenomena were the focus of early definitions of conflict (Fink, 1968; Mack & Snyder, 1957).

Pondy (1967), for instance, had sorted these definitions into several categories: antecedent conditions, emotions, perceptions and behaviors. He had also argued, however, that rather than picking one of these definitions, a broad working definition of conflict as the entire process that encompassed these phenomena should be adopted. This argument is particularly relevant for this

dissertation, as it proposes that there should be a process that allows for more transparent identification of conflict.

In acknowledgement of that and seeking to define it in a more precise way, conflict was defined by Kenneth (1976) as 'the process which begins when one party perceives that another has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his'. This definition allows conflict to be seen on a broader context, as proposed by Pondy, while defining the beginning point of the conflict process in a more structured way.

While there is still no generally accepted definition of conflict in the literature, there seem to be two general approaches. The first approach, following Schmidt and Kochan (1972), has a narrower focus upon phenomena associated with competitive intentions, such as deliberate interference with the other's goals. The second approach, following Pondy (1967) and Kenneth (1976), adopts more general definitions which move 'upstream' in the conflict process to include events (usually perceptions of a given party) which occur prior to the choice of conflict-handling modes. However, the number of theorists adopting general definitions appears to be growing as research on conflict handling modes has become more popular (Pruitt, Rubin, & Kim 1994; Putnam & Poole, 1987). As such, giving the scope of this dissertation, Kenneth's general definition of conflict will be used.

Having suggested a definition of conflict based on past literature, the next step in this review is to take a closer look into face-to-face conflict handling and how it has been explored in the literature.

2.2 Conflict Handling

Conflict handling is an important part of the dynamics of conflict, as it is suggested to dictate personal outcomes of the people engaged in the conflict (Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000). These personal outcomes in return, might have the potential to either defuse or escalate conflicts if we assume Kenneth's conflict definition and the frustration of a concern given a negative outcome.

Blake and Mouton (1964) first identified five different approaches to handling conflict. These were, however, based on fixed managerial styles and underlying values which were then adapted

into a taxonomy of a two-dimensional model by Thomas and Kilmann (1974). This served to better generalize beyond the superior-subordinate relationship. The two dimensional model of Thomas and Kilmann was later operationalized by Rahim (1983) into the following five dimensions of conflict handling: (1) integrating (high concern for self and the other); (2) dominating (high concern for self and low concern for the other); (3) obliging (low concern for self and high concern for the other); (4) avoiding (low concern on both dimensions); and (5) compromising (middle on both dimensions). Both models can be found on Appendix 8.1. and are mediated by the level of assertiveness (attempting to satisfy one's own concerns) and cooperativeness (attempting to satisfy other's concerns). Further explanation for each conflict handling modes can be found on the table in Appendix 8.2.

As proposed by Rahim, more cooperative conflict management styles (i.e., compromising, integrating, and obliging styles) are associated with positive individual outcomes, whereas less cooperative styles (i.e., avoiding and dominating styles) often lead to negative outcomes (Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000).

While these two-dimensional taxonomy and its conflict handling modes have gained popularity in the literature (Putnam & Poole, 1987), and have been validated several times (Prein, 1976; Van de Vliert & Hordijk, 1989), researchers have not seemed to agree on what exactly those modes are, being interpreted as behaviors, orientations, strategies or other constructs (Kenneth, 1992). For the purpose of this dissertation, these conflict modes will be interpreted as behaviors.

As key concepts of face-to-face conflict handling in the literature were presented, and the approach in which to interpret the five factor models was suggested for this study, it is important to understand how these concepts translate to the digital online environment. This will be discussed in the following.

2.3 Conflict in Digital Communication

The way how users manage interpersonal conflict online seems to have been overlooked. As pointed out by Ishi (2010), conflict management had been predominantly studied on face-to-face contexts. Early theories on online conflicts however suggest that, due to its lack of social-context

cues, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tends to increase conflicts (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Past research has also argued that CMC is not rich enough to manage conflicts (Daft & Lengel, 1984). It had also been suggested that CMC differed in many ways, both technically as well as culturally from more traditional communication technologies (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984).

Mind that these were findings captured at a time where CMC was still in its beginning and very rudimentary. If one thinks of the possibilities that have arisen through technology – e.g. Skype, online conferencing, avatars, emojis – CMC is nowadays becoming ever richer as a way of communicating and slowly getting more akin to face-to-face communication.

Moreover, as people keep communicating online with each other over time this lack of richness in the communication seems to diminish and people get closer to each other, as proposed by Ye (2007). Alas, there is still a long way before face-to-face communication and CMC can become completely interchangeable without the loss of richness.

Another argument could be made that the world is ever more converging towards a “Global Culture” where cultural preferences are aligning (Rieff, 1993). As such, distinctions made by Kiesler et. al., in 1984, between CMC and other more traditional communication technologies, both technically and culturally, could nowadays be said to be lessened if not almost negligible regarding some aspects.

However, Kiesler et. al. (1984) covered some questionings regarding this type of communication that despite technological advancements could very well persist – if only to a lesser degree today. As such, two of these questionings from the early literature of Kiesler et. al. will be presented and how they tie to the dissertation’s relevance will be outlined. These questionings will serve to further lay out the implications that CMC was suggested to have and how they could still lead to online conflicts today in an online gaming community.

1. Absence of Regulating Feedback:

“Does communication through text alone reduce coordination of communication?”

In traditional forms of communication, non-verbal cues like head nods, smiles, eye contact and tone of voice give speakers and listeners information they can use to modify, control and regulate exchanges (Edinger & Patterson, 1983).

Despite the aforementioned progress in that regard, electronic communication may still be inefficient for resolving such coordination problems and due to it, the receiver of the message might still misinterpret the intended message of the sender. This misinterpretation can lead to frustration and leave people with a feeling that their concerns are not being understood or even cared about, consequently leading to potential conflicts in a gaming setting.

2. Social Anonymity:

“Is electronic communication depersonalizing?”

Communicators must imagine their audience. Messages can be depersonalized, inviting stronger or more uninhibited text and more assertiveness in return. As later shown by Connolly et. al. (1990), anonymity has the potential to raise group polarization by restricting the exchange of social cues, which in turn can promote uninhibited behavior (Connolly, Jessup, & Galegher, 1990). Also, it was proposed that the anonymity in CMC provides people with a low threat setting that may alter human behavior (Nunamaker, Dennis, George, Valacich, & Vogel, 1991). This could lead to aggressive behavior in a gaming setting whenever conflicts arise.

Nevertheless, as already touched upon, with the development of technology and features in CMC, new studies have expanded on these questionings.

While Kiesler et. al. questioned in 1984 whether anonymity lead to depersonalization in digital communication, Dawson (2006) proposed that frequency of online communication on the other hand increases the degree of personal closeness in online communities. It was also found that the frequency of online communications also promotes more supportive relations (Haythornthwaite, 2000). Moreover, as already mentioned, the lack of richness in online communication which was said to increase conflicts, was shown by Ye (2007) to diminish as people keep communicating online over extended periods of time.

As such, these studies extended the early theories and demonstrated that CMC is not always impersonal or task-oriented and that online relationships might not be substantially different from face-to-face relationships in many aspects.

In this sub-chapter, concepts, questionings and findings from the past – older and more recent – literature on conflicts in digital communication were outlined and their relevance to this dissertation discussed. In the following, conflict handling in online settings will be addressed and literature on the topic will be discussed.

2.4 Conflict Handling in Online Settings

Ishii (2010) first applied Rahim's (1983) operationalized model to his study on conflict handling in online contexts. This was based on the notion that handling interpersonal conflicts face-to-face is similar to handling those in an online context, which as discussed in sub-chapter 2.3, newer literature also seems to suggest.

According to Ishii, like in face-to-face contexts, personal relationships in online contexts differ in terms of the degree of closeness and closeness in return, plays an important role in conflict management. Closeness in relationships is characterized by high levels of psychological intimacy, attachment, self-disclosure, perceived similarity and mutual support (Maxwell, 1985). In short, individuals try to solve conflict constructively if there is a perceived closeness in the relationship (Ishii, 2010). Ishii's results indicate that this feeling of perceived closeness, just like on a face-to-face context, is a mediator on how people handle conflicts online.

Hence, when exploring the ESO community looking out for perceived closeness of players demarks an interesting starting point to understand conflict handling within the community.

This sub-chapter outlined that online conflict handling styles can be similar to face-to-face contexts, and that the perceived closeness in online relationships can affect these styles and their outcomes in return.

This literature review examined definitions of conflict in the literature, proposed one to be used throughout the dissertation, analyzed past literature regarding face-to-face conflict handling styles, as well as outlined and reviewed past literature around conflict in digital communication settings. As was shown, conflict in digital communication is a very wide topic which is still in

need of further exploration. While older literature proposes that CMC is likely to increase conflicts, more recent literature has shown that other aspects – largely brought by new technology and cultural changes – might in fact counter-balance conflict increase in online settings.

This dissertation takes both perspectives into account acknowledging that due to the latest developments, potential implications leading to conflict from CMC addressed by early authors can be mitigated. However, it also acknowledges that they can very well persist to some degree and need further exploration. Conflict handling in online settings was also reviewed, and the link between face-to-face and online conflict handling styles was presented. Perceived closeness was shown to impact online conflict handling styles. The concepts, frameworks and theories discussed in this literature review do not have the purpose of providing a baseline for testing or validating them but will serve as insights and touchpoints for the objectives of this dissertation.

While past literature has been starting to deal with conflicts in online settings, there still seems to be a gap about how conflict emerges and is played out in online gaming communities. Therefore, this dissertation will explore this gap in the literature.

Gaming communities can potentially be even more complex than other online settings since there are many things involved affecting or even shaping these online conflicts (e.g. game progression, achievement, competition, collaboration and money transactions). As such, this dissertation will seek to explore this gap through a netnography study on the case of the ESO gaming community.

3. Community Case: Zenimax Online Studios and The Elder Scrolls Online Game

In this section, a case study of Zenimax Online Studios and its game, The Elder Scrolls Online is developed. Zenimax Media Inc. and its subsidiary Zenimax Online Studios is firstly presented to establish the strategic relevance of the subsidiary to the company. Subsequently the game itself, which is the only game developed by the subsidiary, as well as its history and the reactions and reviews from players and critics will be presented. The case study is not developed for teaching purposes. Its purpose serves to contextualize the game with its community, how it was attracted, developed and what impact the company's business decisions had on it.

3.1 Zenimax Media Inc. and Zenimax Online Studio LLC.

Zenimax Media Inc. is an American video game privately held holding company based in Rockville, Maryland. The company owns six development subsidiaries: id Software, Arkane Studios, MachineGames, Tango Gameworks, Bethesda Game Studios and Zenimax Online Studios (Zenimax Media Inc., 2018). It also owns one publishing subsidiary: Bethesda Softworks (Zenimax Media Inc., 2018). The company was founded in 1999 by Bethesda Softworks founder Christopher Weaver (Ramsay, 2012) and Robert Altman.

Back when Bethesda Softworks was not associated with Zenimax the company had managed to secure a spotlight in the Role-Playing Game (RPG)¹ genre of the gaming industry with the first installments of The Elder Scrolls series: *The Elder Scrolls Arena* and *the Elder Scrolls Morrowind*. Both games have gained high critical and popular acclaim over the years (Metacritic, 2002 ; PCGAMER, 2014).

The skills and reputation developed by Bethesda Softworks in the RPG genre as well as previous IPs were carried over to Zenimax Online Inc. This gave the company an edge in the RPG genre, solidifying its position within the gaming industry. While the company has expanded to other genres successfully over the years, many of its greatest titles were in the RPG genre - e.g. *The Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout series*. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for instance, had sold over 50 million copies worldwide since 2015 (Kollar, 2015).

Despite establishing itself in the RPG genre and later on in other genres, Zenimax Media Inc. relied solely on single player games. Acknowledging the opportunities in the MMO genre and in its intricate mechanics of monetization, the company realized that it could not pass up this venue for profits. To put this into perspective, one could compare the monetization of a single player game to an MMO game. If Zenimax's best sold single player game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is taken as an example, it had sold over \$10 million copies on its first year upon release in 2011 at a revenue of around \$650 Million (Yin-Poole, 2011). Assuming an MMO in which monetization is both buy-to-play as well as through subscription, if the average retail price were around \$60 – comensurate to *Skyrim's* initial retail price - with a monthly subscription of \$14,99, the company could earn more than \$1 billion in extra revenue if only 6 million players were to

¹ RPG is a genre in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting

subscribe for just one year. Considering the higher life-cycle MMOs have – due to updates and expansions – this genre could have indeed appealed to the company profit wise.

In 2007 the company first decided to pursue the MMO genre, when it first formed Zenimax Online Studios and appointed Matt Fior as the head of the venture (Game Industry International, 2007). Much secrecy revolved around what the plans of Zenimax Media Inc and its MMO focused subsidiary were. In 2012 an anonymous industry source revealed that the MMO Zenimax had been working on was an MMOPRG based on *The Elder Scrolls* franchise called “*The Elder Scrolls Online*” (Connors, 2012).

Indeed, given the huge undertaking of the company in penetrating such a complex and new genre, the choice of basing it on one of its most popular and renowned IPs seemed like the obvious choice for driving hype and sales around the game upon its release. However, this generated backlash from some fans of the series who were afraid the move to the MMO genre would destroy aspects of the game like the single-player experience, which made the series so great to begin with (Brightman, 2012).

In late 2013 *The Elder Scrolls Online* was finally announced to release on the 4th of April 2014 on PC and in June 2015 on Playstation 4 and Xbox One consoles (Dyer, 2013).

3.2 The Elder Scrolls Online MMORPG

3.2.1 Release and First Reactions

The *Elder Scrolls Online* received mixed reviews upon release, earning a weighted aggregate rating of 71/100 on Metacritic and 5.8/10 from 2440 user score reviews (Metacritic, 2014). PC Gamer gave the game a score of 68/100 writing that it was "an MMORPG of moderate scope with a few good ideas" but cautioning that the game was not good enough to award a monthly subscription fee (PCGAMER, 2014). The game was mainly criticized for an excess of bugs², a "phasing" mechanic that separated players from groups, and its Veteran Progression System – a

² Bug is an error, flaw, failure or fault in a computer program or system that causes it to produce an incorrect or unexpected result

progression system which was deemed to be too grindy³. Players felt like the game did not truly feel like either an MMORPG or an Elder Scrolls game. As a result, ESO did not manage to come across very well neither to the MMO gamer or the Elder Scrolls series and RPG fan.

3.2.2 Gameplay

The game works as an action-based MMORPG where the combat is fast-paced and dynamic, requiring players to master the skill through playing.

As in previous *The Elder Scrolls* titles, gameplay is mostly non-linear – meaning that players can set out to do whatever they want whenever they want it without being bound to the story's narrative. The game is composed by a mixture of quests (e.g. save a village), random events and free-roam exploration of the world.

It does not provide a mode for single-player offline play, although the developers have stated that there is "plenty of content" designed to accommodate players who prefer to play solo (Zenimax Online Studios Inc., 2018). This statement served to appeal to previous fans of the series upon release, who had never played MMOS before or did not like playing this genre. The player can play as ten different races and must choose one of five classes when creating their character. Each class gives the player various skills and passive effects, creating a complex system of strategies for theorycrafting⁴ within the community. These features strengthen the roleplaying experience and, together with an extensive character appearance customization, allows for players to create their own alter-egos and immerse themselves into the game world.

3.2.3 Player versus Environment and Player versus Player

The game consists of mainly two dimensions: Player versus Environment (PVE) and Player versus Player (PVP).

³ Grinding refers to the playing time spent doing repetitive tasks within a game to unlock a particular game item or to build the experience needed to progress smoothly through the game.

⁴ Theorycrafting is the mathematical analysis of game mechanics, usually in video games, to discover optimal strategies and tactics.

The PVE portion of the game is comprised of questing and defeating monsters as well as dungeon crawling and raiding. What defines PVE is essentially to fight against enemy AI in a game. As such, players can play alone (although other players are present in the game world) by exploring the world and doing quests while engaging with enemy AI. Additionally, they can group with other people to do so as well. To participate in group dungeons, players need to group with three other fellow players to master the dungeons. These have usually three difficulties: normal, veteran and veteran hard mode. The more seasoned, geared, skilled and coordinated the group is, the more likely it is for the group to succeed in these dungeons as their tier progress. Raids are the ‘endgame’ of the PVE experience. Raids are constituted of groups of up to 12 players trying to master hordes of enemies, followed by difficult to beat bosses. Like group-dungeons, raids also have three difficulties. The best gears⁵ can be earned either by the hardest dungeons or by the hardest trials. Grouping with other players is therefore required to excel in the game.

The PVP portion of the game is comprised by battles and wars among players. The game possesses three factions: Ebonheart Pact, Aldmeri Dominion and Daggerfall Covenant. These three factions battle each other on a massive map called Cyrodill. There are usually 3 campaigns – versions of that map – in which players need to fight and beat players from opposing factions. Players earn points depending on their contribution to the campaign and every month or week (depending on the campaign), the best player earns the title of Emperor – a reputable title within the in-game community.

Players can choose if they want to contribute individually or cooperatively in these campaigns, offering ways to collaborate and coordinate strategies in this competitive environment.

Nonetheless, the PVP community has been the one who has more enduringly criticized ZOS due to class balancing⁶ and lags⁷ which they deem to destroy their gaming experience in the PVP environment (ESO Forums, 2015).

⁵ Gear in gaming refers to equipment like armor and weapons that boost a character’s skills and effectiveness.

⁶ Class balancing refers to an attempt of ZOS in making all 5 classes equally competitive to minimize unfair advantages of one class being better than others. This prevents players into being forced into one single class which outperforms the others.

⁷ Lag is a slow response from a computer. It can be due to computer performance issues or connection issues. In this case, it refers to ZOS’ server instability leading to connection issues.

ZOS has adamantly stated over the years that they want to integrate both PVE and PVP as a holistic experience within the game, particularly regarding class skills. This means that skills work the same both for PVE and PVP.

Nevertheless, due to class balancing reasons (since classes play very differently in the two modes), complaints have surfaced in the community about ZOS stance in blending PVE and PVP skills together. This often leads to conflict between PVE and PVP players (ESO Forums, 2018). Moreover, discussions have also arisen in which players complain about being forced to play a given mode, e.g. PVE, to earn gear and skills to be competitive in the other mode (PVP) and vice-versa.

3.2.4 Monetization over the years

Upon release ZOS opted for a traditional buy-to-play subscription-based model. Meaning that a player would pay \$60 for the game and for a monthly subscription of \$14,99 to be able to play it (Gamestar, 2013). Despite complaints from fans in the beginning because of the high upfront investment (Tassi, 2014 ; see Reddit posts, 2015), Matt Firor had stated that this model would ensure the best possible experience for all players. According to him, there were two primary motivators for this: one, to ensure monetization did not interfere with the traditional Elder Scrolls experience, and two, to keep money flowing for future content (Foster, 2013).

However, because of its shaky release likely affecting the word of mouth and consequently adoption of the product, ZOS decided to move away from forced subscriptions in 2015, making the game buy-to-play at a lower price with an optional subscription feature (Zenimax Online Studios, 2018).

In 2015 ZOS therefore rebranded the game into *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* to incorporate these changes to the revenue model. With the new optional subscription feature, subscribed players would now gain some perks within the game, e.g. more inventory space, higher experience rewards and tokens to purchase cosmetics from the in-game store (Zenimax Online Studios Inc., 2015 ; Lufkin, 2015). This generated mixed opinions as people who had already bought the game under Firor's subscription-based concept were afraid this could mean the game would lose on quality and frequency of content expansions (ESO Forums, 2015).

Others were happy and less reluctant to give the game a try, potentially converting more players to the game (see user comments on PCGAMER, 2015).

While ESO had made use of its Crown Store – an in-game store where people can buy crowns for real money and exchange crowns for cosmetics – since the launch of Tamriel Unlimited, in 2016 it introduced its highly controversial Crown Crates to its revenue stream (Zenimax Online Studios Inc., 2016). Crown Crates, as put by ZOS “(...) are a new addition to the ESO Crown Store that will give you a chance to obtain exclusive and unique pets, mounts, and more alongside useful consumable items”. The way it works is that players can buy Crown Crates through Crowns and from these crates they can randomly earn unique cosmetics for their avatars from a loot table. This move has since been widely unpopular among players, who likened it to gambling boxes enabling addiction and unnecessary waste of money. Players have lashed out against ZOS even going as far as to call them greedy in respect to this move (ESO Forums, 2016). Moreover, due to the limited access of these cosmetics and the high amount of money that can be spent to get whatever a player wants, players have communicated their frustrations regarding this system. Despite this, it would seem like Crown Crates might provide ZOS with a significant revenue stream, as the company has continued to implement it and expand the loot tables ever since (Zenimax Online Studios, 2018).

3.2.5 Learning from past mistakes and The Elder Scrolls Online today

Faced with the underwhelming reactions and bugs plaguing the game upon its release, ZOS has taken many steps in improving the game ever since. As previously discussed, it made the game more accessible by lowering the initial purchase price and making the subscription an optional feature (Zenimax Online Studios, 2018). It also overhauled the previous Veteran System which relied on a vertical progression system to encompass a horizontal progression system called Champion System (CP). In this way, the game became less grindy after a player reached a certain level and made it easier for new players to be competitive with more seasoned players. This helped both player types to engage with each other more easily.

With the introduction of the *One Tamriel* free expansion (Zenimax Online Studios Inc., 2016) ZOS also solved the problem of the ‘phasing’ mechanics earlier touched upon by players and critics. With this expansion players could quest together and advance to every zone without level

requirements which used to hinder play among friends who were not at the same level range. Moreover, due to several expansions the game brought about large pieces of content that made ESO more akin to The Elder Scrolls series, allowing players to further immerse themselves in the game world. Additionally, ZOS introduced class representatives to mediate discussions and give people a voice regarding the class balancing uproar. Crown Crates were also given freely through daily login rewards to counter the objections of players not being able to gain their exclusive cosmetics.

By 2017 ESO had improved so much that it was ranked by MMO players and critics as the number one MMO of the year (Murphy, 2017 ; Royce, 2017), with an estimated community ranging around 10 million players.

In light of that, it would seem like ZOS has successfully managed to turn its position upside down in the MMO genre over the years. After many mistakes and backlash from the community, ZOS seems to finally be steering towards the right direction.

Despite this, there are many areas in which ZOS needs to improve. From the laggy PVP experience to the challenging class balancing between PVP and PVE and its controversial monetization strategies, there still is work to be done.

3.2.6 Community

Given ZOS's scope with ESO, the community has been composed of a multitude of different people with different interests. It was designed to attract single-player RPG fans and fans from the Elder Scrolls series, MMO gamers from the PVE nature and from the PVP nature as well as casual and hardcore online gamers.

As such, while the community is gifted with diversity which can lead to valuable business opportunities, it can also be plagued by disparity, conflicting opinions, concerns and expectations. The latter all of which could be sources and/or intensifiers of conflict.

Besides, due to the back and forth of ZOS regarding monetization, class balancing and other ever-changing design decisions, each step the company takes to address a given issue is bound to frustrate some concern of at least a group of people within the community – tying back to

Kenneth's definition of conflict. Therefore, this community seems to provide an enriching subject of study around the topic of conflict within online gaming.

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

As previously outlined, the main methodology of this dissertation is netnography. Netnography is in its essence a way of conducting ethnographic studies on the Internet. It is a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of communities and cultures emerging through computer-mediated communications.

This methodology was firstly developed and proposed by Kozinets (1998) as a way of conducting ethnographic research online. As a marketing research technique, it makes use of information publicly available in online forums and other online media to uncover and understand the needs and influences of potentially important online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002). This seems therefore like an appropriate methodology to approach the dynamics of conflict within the ESO community in two ways: firstly, it allows for a natural exploration around the dynamics of conflict within the community, leading to relevant academic implications on how conflict is played out in such an online gaming community. Secondly, as a marketing research technique, it can also provide managerial implications to Zenimax Online Studios on how to better approach the conflicts that happen within its community, and what to potentially look out for throughout the product's life cycle regarding the topic of conflict.

Compared to more traditional and market-oriented ethnographic methodologies, netnography is substantially less time consuming and elaborate, with the capability of being rather non-intrusive (Kozinets, 2002). One significant strength of this methodology is that it provides the researcher a window into naturally occurring behaviors such as searches for information by, and communal word-of-mouth discussions between people – especially important when dealing with the topic of conflict. This window access may provide important opportunities for subject-researcher and consumer-marketer relationships (Kozinets, 2002). Due to its nature, netnography allows continuing access to informants in a particular online social situation (Kozinets, 2002).

The limitations of netnography draw from the need for researcher interpretive skill – as text messages and images are not as rich as face-to-face interaction - and the lack of informant identifiers present in the online context that leads to difficulty generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample (Kozinets, 2002).

Acknowledging this, researchers wishing to generalize findings of a netnography study of a particular online community to other communities must therefore carefully evaluate similarities and employ multiple methods of triangulation (Kozinets, 2002).

As a type of ethnographic study, this dissertation seeks to come to a grounded knowledge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, the study is carried out inductively, allowing insights gathered from the data to lead to theories and implications. Hence, Grounded theory is used to interpret and analyze the gathered data.

4.2 Online Community Selection

The community chosen for this study is known as “The Elder Scrolls Online” community and is estimated to have around 10 million players worldwide (Murphy, 2017; Royce, 2017). This community was chosen as it is very sizeable and, as previously discussed in the case presentation, is constituted by several different gamers with different interests, expectations and concerns, which can lead to conflict.

The game’s official forum as well as the game itself were chosen as places to study the community and its interactions, with the forums being the main platform chosen. The forums were chosen as the main platform as it has substantial traffic of postings - well over a thousand posts a day. Moreover, as further validated through a member-check, the forums was found to be the platform were the most passionate players, largely composed of insiders (Kozinets, 1999) interacted with each other. While there is no exact way of knowing how many players are present on the forums, there are at least a couple of thousand members weekly that actively post on the platform, with potential hundreds of thousands interacting on it over a given month.

The forums also allow for better identification between “tourists”, “minglers”, “devotees” and “insiders” (see Kozinets, 1999) through forum badges that players earn depending on their social presence on the platform. However, in this platform people engage after a given frustration

within the game has already happened. The in-game chat is therefore used to capture frustration and consequently conflict when it happens in game – allowing for a natural and instantaneous environment in which conflict can be explored.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The initial search around the topic of conflict was carried out broadly. Given Kenneth's (1976) definition of conflict, conflict was henceforth associated to frustration to narrow down the search. On the forums, any threads that were associated to frustration were reviewed and deemed relevant if the discussion among community members persisted for more than 10 posts of interactions among members. Threads in which the notion of frustration were salient (e.g. "Why do most pve players hate pvp") were exhaustively analyzed. Analysis of such threads lead the research to relevant in-game features, events and expressions that seemed associated to conflict (e.g. PVP, PVE, elitism, noob, crown crates, pay to win, etc.). These expressions, events and features of the game sequentially became keywords used in the forums search engine to further explore their relationship with conflict. On the forums 53 threads were analyzed of which 31 were deemed relevant based on saliency of frustration expressed and richness of interaction among community members in the thread. Within these threads 1130 postings were read of which 440 were deemed relevant based on if and how the poster communicated frustration, if he/she engaged in conflict with another member and how he/she engaged in conflict- based on Rahim's adapted model of conflict handling (1983). Regarding the in-game chat no search engine was used, and no particular key words were looked for as the platform is more dynamic in nature when it comes to data collection. Therefore, the researcher participated in group content and PVP activities – which data on the forums suggested to be playgrounds for conflicts – to spot the emergence of frustration and conflicts and capture them whenever they arose.

Additionally, three member checks were carried out through semi-structured interviews (Galletta & Cross, 2013) with one devotee and two insiders (Kozinets, 2002). Member checks are procedures whereby final research reports' findings are presented to the people who have been studied to solicit their comments (Kozinets, 2002).

One insider is a renowned class representative of the game (appointed by ZOS) who has developed a substantial sense of knowledge through experiences with the community. These

member checks served to clarify and further explore insights gained from netnography to exhaustively build a ground of knowledge about the topic of the dissertation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data analysis was carried out through grounded research and through building a thematic network out of quotations based on codes, categories and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories identified were conflict emergence, conflict handling, diverging concerns and positions, community divide, change and investment in the game. Those categories then gave rise to two main themes: the development of frustration and the development of conflict. A visual of the categories and themes as well as their relationship can be found in Appendix 8.3.

4.4 Access to Community and Participants

Access to the community was gained by joining the game and the forums. The researcher had already been a member of the game and the forums for a couple of years. This participant-observation data collection method allowed the researcher to gain a close and intimate familiarity with the community and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment (Jorgensen, 1989). Since the forums is a public domain platform, all postings could be seen regardless of joining it or not and information could be drawn from it freely. Observations through the in-game chat, however, demanded owning a copy of the game and having an active account.

To gain access to participants willing to partake in member checks, enrolling on the forums was necessary, as it was only possible to post on it after joining it. The forums were the platform of choice for requesting member check participants. The reason for that is because this platform allowed for an easier identification between categories of online posters based on their level of involvement in the community and consumption of the product (Kozinets, 1999) through forum badges.

Hence, being already a member of this platform, a thread was made on the forums presenting the study, clarifying its purposes and asking for willing participants to take part in a semi-structured interview to clarify findings from netnography. Two member-checks were carried out through direct text messages with who will be called PO and EW, for anonymity purposes, on the forums

platform. The third interview, with class representative who will be named X, was carried out through a voice call.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The researcher presented the study and its objectives before engaging with the community on all platforms. The collection of any personal information from any poster or participant was explicitly foregone for the protection of the participant. Forum names or any form of identification was excluded from the study. In case any participant wished to be identified in the study, he/she had to explicitly request it and had to have arranged so with the researcher.

The study treated participants with respect. Participants were free to abandon the study at any given time without any need of explanation. Participants were made clear that any data gathered from interviews also be excluded from the study upon request. The researcher committed to carrying out the study in compliance with rigorous ethical standards, taking the well-being of the participants as a priority.

5. Result Analysis: Ethnographic Themes

5.1 The Development of Frustration

The analysis of the netnography data shows that cutting across the dynamics of conflict within the community there is a central theme identified as the development of frustration, which appears to give rise to conflict. Frustration appears to take form within the community through a process. Investment in the game, fueled by passion, seems to be the starting point for this process. As players start to invest effort, time and/or money for their personal pursuits in-game they seem to generate a sense of satisfaction and ever-growing expectations on what to accomplish next. Accomplishments and expectations can vary. It might be something like making their avatar look a particular way by unlocking a certain type of cosmetic. It can alternatively be getting a certain number of DPS-check⁸ to be able to run a certain content. It might also be to become the player

⁸ DPS-check (or Damage Per Second check) is a damage threshold you need to reach to be effective against certain content in the game.

who gets the highest number of player kills on a PVP scenario. Whatever the personal pursuit, the player seems to feel immersed in it and takes it seriously, as validated through a member check (Kozinets, 2002) with X, who states:

“The more passionate you are, the more immersed you feel and the more I think you engage in conflict”.

The next step in the process is when something happens which dampens or negatively affects this positive feeling and expectations the player experiences and anticipates. This step, which demarks the emergence of a frustration, seems to generate a concern. This concern is something the player seems to hold as important, as it is perceived to harm his/her gaming experience. As such, a concern appears to be a fearful anticipation of further frustrating in-game experiences. These concerns are then often presented on the forums as complaints tied to the player’s frustrations.

It is very common to run into players expressing their concerns on the forums regarding a multitude of topics after they had a frustrating experience in-game. For instance, examples are found in the following thread, titled “Clown Crates!!!” concerning a player who, frustrated with the rewards he/she got from ESO’s Crown Crates, states:

“Why would anybody buy these crates at this point (...) I don’t really have anything else to say, I’m just annoyed and disappointed lol”.

Another example can be seen in another player’s thread titled “FIX PET TARGETING PLEASE”. Pet targeting is a mechanic in-game which allows players to target another player’s pet in combat. This can generate issues whenever there are many players with pets in a PVP scenario. Since the player can often not target the opposing player specifically, as the targeting system is instead focused on the opposing player’s pet, the player might lose a PVP fight due to it. In the following quote the owner of the thread shares a video about his frustrating gameplay experience in a PVP scenario regarding this matter:

“I’ll let this brief video (which I had to mute, for what will probably be obvious reasons) speak for itself while I’m off playing Red Dead Redemption 2”

This happens while showing that his/her frustration had gotten so accentuated that it lead him/her to switch to another game.

As result from the netnography data, and further validated with class representative X, the biggest sources of frustration, and consequently concern, seem to take place during new updates and patches of the game, as those bring about change. When talking about patches and updates, X explains that “(...) frustration arises whenever there is change, as people have to go out of their comfort zones and do things differently in a way that they were not used to”.

Another element that seems to lead to frustration and accentuates it whenever there is change is community divide. Due to the aforementioned variety in expectations within the community, groups of diverging expectations emerge. Identified groups with diverging expectations were PVE groups and PVP groups as well as new players and seasoned players. These groups therefore tend to generate opposing concerns, which, when addressed, seem to further frustrate the diverging group’s concerns. This insight can be especially noticed when looking at the engagement on the forums between PVE and PVP players. As shown in the exchange among community members on a player’s thread “why do most pve players hate pvp?”, another player answers the thread’s question with

“Because several players think PVP community is responsible for all nerfs⁹ that we see often added with each update”.

As with this example, many other posts and threads reveal a frustration that diverging groups within the community attribute to each other whenever there is change.

Another frequent topic of frustration that can lead up to community divide is the struggle in engagement between new players and seasoned players, particularly in PVE group content. One observed issue within this matter is new players joining teams queued as tanks (a role to take damage away from the group) without having the proper class, skill or gear for it. This ends up making the new player ineffective in the tank role, often leading the entire team to soak up the damage instead and fail the group dungeon. This often leads more seasoned players to frustration. This can be seen on another player’s post on his thread “Fake tanks are becoming a real problem for solo queues”. in which he/she complains:

⁹ A nerf is a change to a game that reduces the desirability or effectiveness of a particular game element. In this case, player C is referring to class skills.

“Everyday i have at least one queue where i get some low cp¹⁰ idiot.”

Conflict around this topic seems to arise due to a mismatch of expectations between new players and seasoned players on how to play content together. This insight from netnography has been validated with EW – a seasoned player - who argues:

“Another thing which I can take both sides on is the whole 'Elite Players' argument, a high-level player annoyed at a low one for not knowing the game/mechanics etc. Yes, if a new player tries something waaaay out of their league, it can be frustrating for a high level/veteran player. But it also is hostile towards the new players, who often go out of their way to write-up their negative experience on Reddit/Forums.”.

Often in the forums, whenever expressing concerns to others, conflicting positions arise. These conflicting positions shared among players seem to exacerbate the frustration of some of them, who sometimes see their concerns being challenged, refuted or made fun off.

This process seems in line with the emergence of conflict proposed by Kenneth (1976), in which it is stated that the beginning process of a conflict lies in a given party feeling that another party has frustrated or is about to frustrate a concern of his/her. As such, Kenneth’s definition of conflict itself appears to capture the conflict emergence within the ESO community. To understand how this conflict plays out, a second theme was identified: The development of conflict.

5.2 The Development of Conflict

Conflict was observed to more prominently take place on two platforms: in-game PVP (where frustration, conflict and competition is an inherent part of the experience) as well as on the forums (where the more passionate players share concerns).

Once the conflict situation has arisen due to frustration of a party’s concern, what seems to impact its development is the type of interactions among players in respect to the concern. The bigger the frustration of a given concern, the less cooperative the conflict handling modes seem

¹⁰ Cp stands for Champion Points – a progression system in ESO that represents what level the player is, signaling how experienced he/she is.

to become. Players who appear very frustrated tend to engage in hostility and in personally attacking other players, even going as far as to tell them to kill themselves. This escalation looks to be especially present in the PVP aspect of the game. One example of this is a post from a player on the thread “A lot of rude players in the community”, in which he states regarding his experiences with ESO:

“(...)I had to block 100+ in a 3 month period last year. (...) I used to get death threats regularly in pvp and not just the "your bad kid kys"¹¹ like some seriously vulgar stuff I can't even begin to repeat on here.”

This thread had 264 postings of players sharing their negative interactions with other players and how bad they felt because of it.

Beyond that, a vicious circle could be observed, both on the forums as well as in-game PVP, in which players who grow in frustration tend to use dominating styles of conflict handling (Rahim, 1983), meaning that they show high concern for themselves and low concern for the other. This seemingly generates more frustration in conflicting parties, enabling them to also engage in dominating styles, therefore escalating the conflict further.

In platforms such as the forums, this escalation attracts more people to the conflict, leading it to last longer, especially if there seems to be group identification among posters (e.g. with PVE group, PVP group, seasoned players, or new players). This phenomenon can be seen for instance in the aforementioned thread “Fake Tanks are becoming a real problem in solo queues”, where the conflict between new players and seasoned ones goes on for 267 posts, occasionally getting very heated.

Group polarizations due to the occasional community divide also appear to affect the conflict handling modes towards less cooperative. Conflicting concerns and positions also seem to exacerbate hostility between players, potentially since this leads to a higher frustration of a given party in feeling his/her concerns are being attacked. Whenever fervent discussions arise, players often seem so passionate and focused on their own concerns that many conflicts seem to be easily solvable were the parties involved not so adamant about having their point acknowledged instead of trying to understand each other. This was validated through a member check with player PO

¹¹ Kys is an abbreviation for “kill yourself”

who states that “(...) a lot of us get a bit of tunnel vision and start to imagine that our unique gaming experience is the norm across the board for all players across all platforms.”

As such, online conflicts within the ESO community forums and in-game PVP seem to be more carried out in the heat of the moment, where players simply want to express their frustrations and concerns instead of discussing them and understanding other people’s points of view – further in line with the dominating style (Rahim, 1983).

That is not to say that there are not a relevant number of players who try to solve conflict and/or understand conflicting positions and interests - integrating style (Rahim, 1983). According to player EW, many players who tend not to take themselves too seriously while playing seem more open to conflicting ideas and objections to their own concerns.

The development of conflict theme as such is a process that starts through the emergence of conflict (originating from the development of frustration theme) and then progresses by the way people engage with each other through conflict handling modes. These modes seem then to further mediate whether conflicts get defused or escalated.

This notion seems in line with Rahim’s, Magner’s, & Shapiro’s (2000) findings that less cooperative conflict handling modes lead to negative individual outcomes. In particular, one individual negative outcome observed is the further development of frustration leading to anger (which escalates conflicts). However, in this case, Rahim et. al’s findings (2000) seem to not only affect the individual but other likeminded players as well whenever they identify themselves with one of the diverging groups. This appears to fortify community divide and the overall conflict around a given concern in return.

Whenever there is a community divide, in which players identify themselves with one of the diverging groups, these conflict handling modes seem to convert to dominating styles towards the group a given player is against. Contrastingly, whenever players engage in conflict with people identified to belong to the same group, they seem more prone to employ integrating styles (Rahim, 1983). In such cases, even when there seemed to be disagreements, players tended to build onto the other players’ concerns, give praise and attempt to solve the conflict constructively. This also seems to be in line with Ishii’s study (2010), as people who identify themselves with a group of players may feel a greater degree of closeness to them (due to

perceived similarity and mutual support). This potentially leads players to employ more cooperative handling styles with that group and less cooperative handling styles with the ones where no closeness is perceived.

5.3 The dynamics of conflict within the ESO community

Data from netnography identified two main themes that describe the dynamics of conflict within the ESO community: the development of frustration and the development of conflict. As presented, the linkage between the two themes is relevant as both seem to be part of a process in the dynamics of conflict.

While in-game and community specific sources of frustration were presented, the question could be asked whether the ensuing conflicts are exclusively particular to the ESO community or whether they can be socially originating in nature. As Kozinets (2002) points out, in netnography there is difficulty in generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample.

However, as depicted by Alvarez et al. (2015), Dawson (2006), Haythornthwaite (2000) and Ye (2007), online relationships and interactions might often times be similar to face-to-face, in the 'real' world.

While trying to identify what people thought the sources of their frustrations were – in order to capture what people perceived as being the sources of conflict – many posts blamed diverging groups within the community as well as ZOS itself. Due to ZOS being responsible for implementing big quarterly changes to the game, it has often found itself in a very difficult position as many frustrations are attributed to the company by the community. However, other players identify conflict to originate from general social problems which embed themselves into particularities of the very game (like the aforementioned PVE vs. PVP and new players vs. seasoned players divide).

Hence, if one thinks of the ESO community as a social community, giving rise to social settings, its game particularities could tie to more traditional social settings and issues that originate from them. Examples that shed light into that can also be seen on the thread "Fake tanks are becoming a real problem for solo queues", where a player in response to another player blaming ZOS for a frustrating interaction in-game, states that "(...) this is a social problem, not a ZOS problem."

Acknowledging relevant insights like this throughout the forums the topic was approached in the member check with Class representative X, where the participant was asked to share opinions on what sources of conflict within the community were, leading to the following quote:

“ I think the conflicts that go on within the community are really more social in nature than anything else. I think it’s amazing how they managed to simulate a world within this game that is so similar to real life, they really managed to make people feel immersed in it. (...) Many of the social issues we see in the real world are present within the game. You see conflict between the poor and the wealthy, you see minorities, conflicting beliefs and all of that I think leads to conflict, as it does in real life.”

According to X, Conflicts between seasoned players (the wealthy) and new players (the poor), as well as conflicts between PVE and PVP, which X likened to political stances and polarization in the real world, are rather social problems than issues that only happen within the community of ESO.

When asked about ZOS role in these conflicts, X stated that “ (...) they have a really hard time dealing with it. As a social problem, they can’t do much about it other than giving them a voice like they did when they introduced class representatives”.

In light of that, the data seems to indicate that the way in which conflict develops within the community could be of a broader social nature and seems to corroborate insights of previous authors which suggest that online interactions (in this case conflict) can indeed be similar to face-to-face (Alvarez et al., 2015; Dawson, 2006; Haythornthwaite, 2000;Ye, 2007).

When dealing with how the conflict is expressed however, the netnography data suggests that some of the early questionings of Kiesler et. al. (1984) do seem relevant in the ESO community today, particularly in terms of anonymity and dampening of regulating feedback. When analyzing the intensity of some hate messages and conflict escalations, the general impersonal nature and anonymity leading to lower social threat (Nunamaker, Dennis, George, Valacich, & Vogel, 1991) of online mediated communications do seem to enable a more hostile approach to engaging in conflict and group polarization (Connolly et. al. 1990).

Moreover, while the argument was made in the literature review that the lack of regulating feedback may be lessened today due to richer media in CMC, there still appears to be a

dampening of regulating feedback. This appears to pronounce itself whenever players are more frustrated and attached to their own concerns, leading them to further misinterpret the message of the sender. The data showed that frustrations can get so accentuated that it even leads players to take advice from another party as an attack against their concern. This can again be seen on the “FIX PET TARGETING PLEASE” thread where the creator of the thread reprehends another player who was giving him advice on how to better deal with pet targeting:

“You are being so shortsighted (...) I figured people would get the point with three minutes’ worth of footage. Silly me.”

Conflict was indeed observed to escalate due to this dampening of regulating feedback.

6. Conclusions and Implications:

6.1 Discussion and Academic Implications

This dissertation based on netnography revealed that the dynamics of conflict within the gaming community of The Elder Scrolls Online is a complex process. The data suggests that this process can be divided into two themes: The development of frustration and the development of conflict. The data presented and subsequent member-checks corroborate Kenneth’s (1976) definition of conflict. This dissertation has qualitatively shown how the link between frustration and conflict can come about in an online gaming community setting and proposes that Kenneth’s definition can be a valuable tool to understand how conflict emerges in such a community.

Frustration was observed to largely come about through a process based on two main events: firstly, the falling short of expectations often brought about by changes carried out by ZOS to the game. This falling short of expectations was observed to negatively affect the positive gaming experience of invested players. This event was observed to mark the emergence of a frustration. Frustrations were then noticed to be taken seriously by the player, generating a fearful anticipation of further negative in-game experiences. This was observed to mark the formation of a concern to the player (a visual depiction of this part of the process can be found in Appendix 8.4.). Secondly, the sharing of these concerns and further engagement with people within the community who have diverging positions based on different expectations and concerns. This

event seems to further accentuate the frustration of players who see their own concerns as being attacked, marking the starting point of the conflict process (see Appendices 8.5 and 8.6 for a visual depiction).

The development of conflict process was observed to be mediated by three factors who seem to interplay with each other: the intensity of frustration of the parties involved in the conflict, the conflict handling modes employed (Rahim, 1983) and whether there is group polarization due to community divide. Community divide was identified to be present between two main pairs of diverging groups inside the community: PVE players and PVP players and new players and seasoned players.

An insight this dissertation presents is that whenever frustrations are high players seem to show high concern for themselves and low concern for the party they are engaged in a conflict with. This goes in line with the dominating conflict handling style proposed by Rahim (1983), which is shown to lead to negative individual outcomes (Rahim et. al. 2000). Exacerbation of frustration leading up to rage was one particular negative outcome observed that often seemed to escalate conflict.

Moreover, whenever group polarizations ensued, a player's conflict handling mode seemed to convert to dominating style towards other players belonging to a diverging group. Whenever the parties seemed to belong to the same group (e.g. two players engaged in a conflict identifying themselves as PVE players), conflict handling modes seemed to convert towards integrating style (Rahim, 1983). This insight can be tied back to Ishii's study (2010), as people who identify themselves with a group of players can feel a greater degree of closeness to them (due to perceived similarity and mutual support), potentially leading them to employ more cooperative handling styles with that group and less cooperative handling styles with the group where no closeness is perceived. Hence, perceived closeness mediating conflict handling styles, as identified by Ishii (2010) for online conflicts in general, could also be relevant to conflict in online gaming settings.

The early notion of Kiesler et. al. (1984) that coordinating communication in CMC is harder due to a dampening of regulating feedback brought about by the loss of richness in online mediated communication also seems to be prevalent in the community under study. However, the insights from netnography of this dissertation suggest that another factor that can aggravate this

dampening in a gaming setting is the magnitude of frustration a player experiences and how focused he/she is on his/her own concern. Players who seemed very frustrated and focused on their own concerns seemed more prone to mis-interpret the message of a given party.

The way in which people engage in conflict also seems to relate to the three factors mediating conflict development. Conflict was observed to escalate the most whenever frustrations were high, group polarizations ensued and dominating conflict handling styles were employed (a visual depiction of this can be found in Appendix 8.7.). In such cases, personal attacks, shaming and hostility was commonly observed, even to an abnormally extreme level (e.g. telling another player to kill himself). This seems to corroborate initial questionings and theories of conflicts in CMC. Therefore, the notion proposed by authors like Kiesler et al. (1984) that the general impersonal nature and anonymity in online mediated communication could lead to a lower social threat (further suggested by Nunamaker et al. in 1991), enabling a more hostile approach to engaging in conflict and group polarization (as presented by Connolly et. al. in 1990) was observed to be prevalent in this gaming community.

The data also shows that while some players attribute their frustrations and consequently the conflicts within the community to ZOS (as they are responsible for implementing changes in-game), others see conflict as originating from a broader social context. As such, while the emergence of frustration (identified in the first theme) was observed to be rather tied to events and issues particular to the game's content and context, the development of conflict could indeed be socially originating in nature.

If one thinks of the gaming setting giving rise to frustrations who are shared socially (like in the forums), general social issues can indeed arise. As observed through netnography and validated through member-checks, particularities of the game can blend with broader social phenomena like group polarizations (e.g. PVP groups vs. PVE groups) and social hierarchies issues within the community (e.g. seasoned players looking down upon new players). The immersion felt by players seems to fuel this crossover between gaming issues and social issues almost naturally (this insight is graphically depicted in Appendix 8.8.). Therefore, the findings of previous authors such as Alvarez et al. (2015), Dawson (2006), Haythornthwaite (2000) and Ye (2007), that suggest that online relationships and interactions might often times be similar to those in the

'real' world, also appears to be corroborated in regard to the topic of conflict within this online gaming community.

6.2 Managerial Implications:

As shown throughout this dissertation, ZOS has been running its game as a service. Meaning that it attempts to acquire new customers while making sure to retain the acquired players and monetising them via more intricate mechanics. The managerial significance of this dissertation lies in the retention of acquired players and how frustration and conflict can impact said retention.

As the data shows, frustrations faced in-game can lead players to play less or even switch to another game entirely. The less time players spend in-game, the less they interface with the Crown Store and the less likely they are to engage in in-game purchases. This has the potential to negatively affect ZOS revenue stream.

Conflicts can also generate other negative emotions and experiences as well as accentuate frustration, as the netnography data of this dissertation revealed. As acknowledged by Hamari and Järvinen (1986), fun experiences through play may be seen as a cluster of positive emotions arising from playing with the game, and therefore fun is a motivation for returning to interact with the product. Consequently, if frustration and conflict get so accentuated where negative emotions and experiences overshadow positive ones, players might indeed not return to the game. Understanding the dynamics of conflict can thus be a crucial strategic step for ZOS in order to optimize its retention.

Indeed, the company has taken many steps in order to improve the gaming experience of its first MMORPG title and its customer retention since its release. Particularly in regard to the topic of conflict, the company has introduced class representatives to mediate discussions and listen to the frustrations the playerbase (both in PVE and PVP) experiences in regard to class balance.

Regardless, conflicts on the forums and in-game PVP still seem to persist. If one looks at these conflicts as socially originating in nature, and thinks of a gaming company who manages to simulate a world in which people feel so immersed in it that it gives rise to social issues akin to those in the real world, the topic of conflict seems to be almost unavoidable in such online

gaming communities. Dealing with conflicts in such communities therefore at the end of the conflict process (the development of conflict theme), while important, could be too reactionary.

However, one dimension the company could have a stronger power over is in regard to the emergence of frustration. As the emergence of frustration appears to originate from aspects of the very game, those are issues that ZOS can have direct and proactive influence over. As such, ZOS should focus on the emergence of frustration in two ways:

(1) Minimize the frustration in engagement between new players and seasoned players by introducing a reward system for seasoned players who assist and mentor new players. This provides seasoned players a benefit in positively engaging with newer ones and makes the relationship between them more mutually beneficial and supportive.

(2) Consider uncoupling PVP and PVE overtime by allowing skills to play differently in the two modes. This could alleviate the emergence of frustration being attributed to the diverging group in regard to class balancing during updates. ZOS should implement this change gradually and communicate with both the PVP and PVE playerbases very transparently how, when, why and what skills would be changed. In this way the company can take the community's feedback throughout the process and implement the changes in a way that minimizes the emergence of frustration and meets both playerbases' expectations.

From a different perspective however, conflict within online gaming communities must not be an inherent bad thing for companies. The fact that players feel so passionate about the game and so immersed in it (to the point where it leads them to engage in very heated conflicts) signals that ZOS has successfully managed to generate something of value to players. This dissertation consequently proposes that online conflict can signalize success in the gaming industry but that these conflicts should be carefully observed, understood and strategically managed through its origin: the emergence of frustration.

7. Limitations and Future Research

As an exploratory qualitative study, this dissertation served to understand the dynamics of conflict within one particular online gaming community. Therefore, insights gained from

netnography do not serve to validate or refute any of the theories presented by past authors but to give a direction for further quantitative and qualitative exploration.

Further research seeking to transfer these insights into other online gaming communities must take caution, as proposed by Kozinets (2002). As identified in this study, the ESO community is particular with regard to the variety of its playerbase and its game context. Therefore, transferring these insights to other gaming communities where the focus might be exclusively PVP or PVE or outside the MMORPG genre may not be advisable.

Moreover, the main platform chosen for this study was largely composed of insiders (players with strong ties to the online group and to the gaming activity) and devotees (players with strong gaming activity). As such, conflict was not properly studied among tourists (players who lack strong social ties and deep interest in playing) and minglers (players who have strong social ties in the community but minimal interest in actually playing the game) (see Kozinets, 2002).

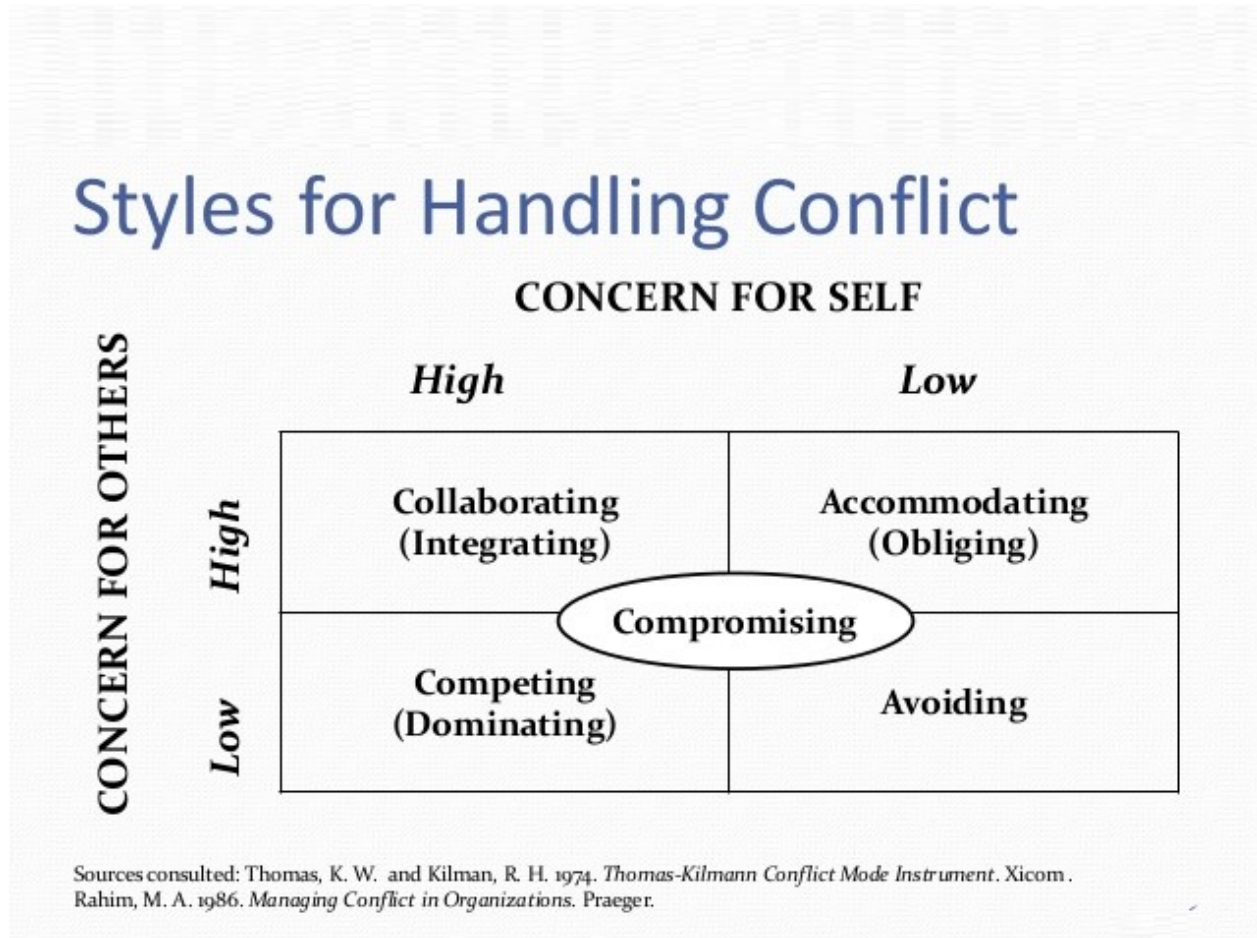
Tourists and Minglers may also be a significant part of ESO's community. As such, this dissertation proposes further exploration through netnography focusing on these type of players within the ESO community.

Identified insights for further quantitative exploration into online gaming communities alike are: Firstly, the relationship between the emergence of frustration in-game and the emergence of conflict. Secondly, the significance of the three identified factors observed to mediate conflict escalation and their potential interplay. Third, the perceived closeness (based on perceived similarity and mutual-support) as a mediator of conflict handling styles in online gaming communities. Fourth, the impact of players' frustration intensity on the dampening of regulating feedback in online gaming communication.

This dissertation served to further shed light into the dynamics of conflict in an online gaming community. It proposes that such online gaming communities can be very complex due to the fact that in-game issues can blend with broader social issues throughout the dynamics of conflict process. Online gaming communities can therefore provide researchers with a rich setting for further exploration into online conflicts.

8. Appendix

8.1 Integration of the Conflict handling models of Thomas and Kilman (1974) and Rahim (1986)



8.2 Explanation of conflict handling styles

Explanation of Thomas' and Kilman's conflict handling modes (1976):

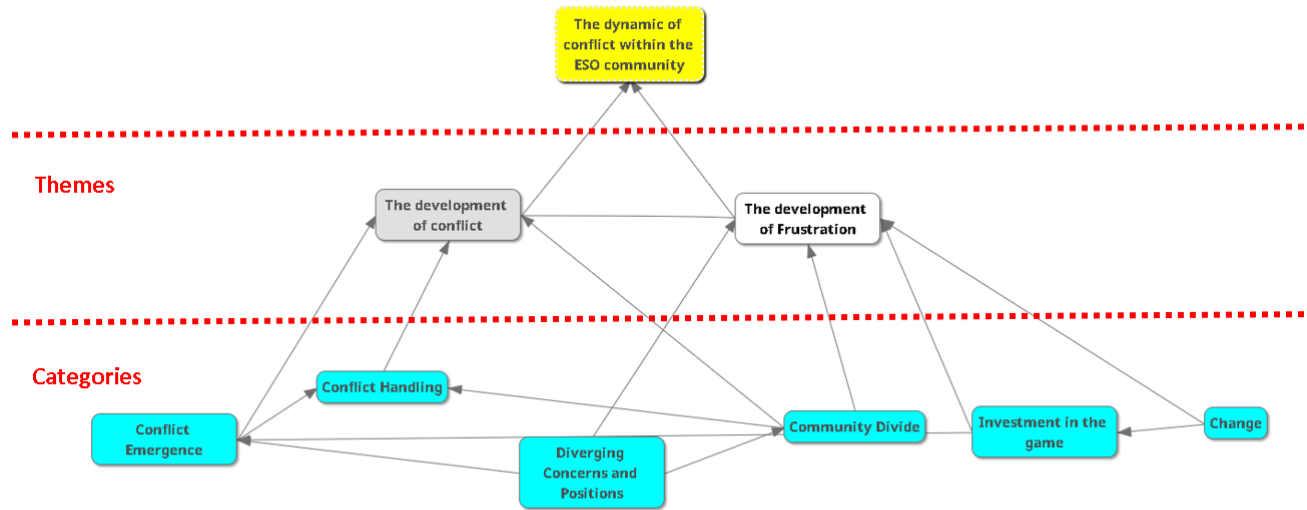
Competing	Is uncooperative and assertive - an individual pursues his own concerns at the other person's expense.
Collaboration	Is both cooperative and assertive - the opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns.

Avoiding	Is uncooperative and unassertive - the person neither pursues his own concerns nor those of the other individual. Thus, conflict is not dealt with.
Accommodating	Is cooperative and unassertive - the opposite of competing. When accommodating, the individual neglects his own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person.
Compromising	Is moderate in both cooperativeness and assertiveness. The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties.

Explanation of Rahim's conflict handling modes (1983):

Dominating	The party goes all out to win his or her objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party.
Integrating	Involves openness; exchanging information, looking for alternatives, and examining differences to solve the problem in a manner that is acceptable to both parties.
Avoiding	The party fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern of the other party.
Obliging	Is associated with attempting to minimize the differences and highlight the commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party.
Compromise	Involves give-and-take whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision.

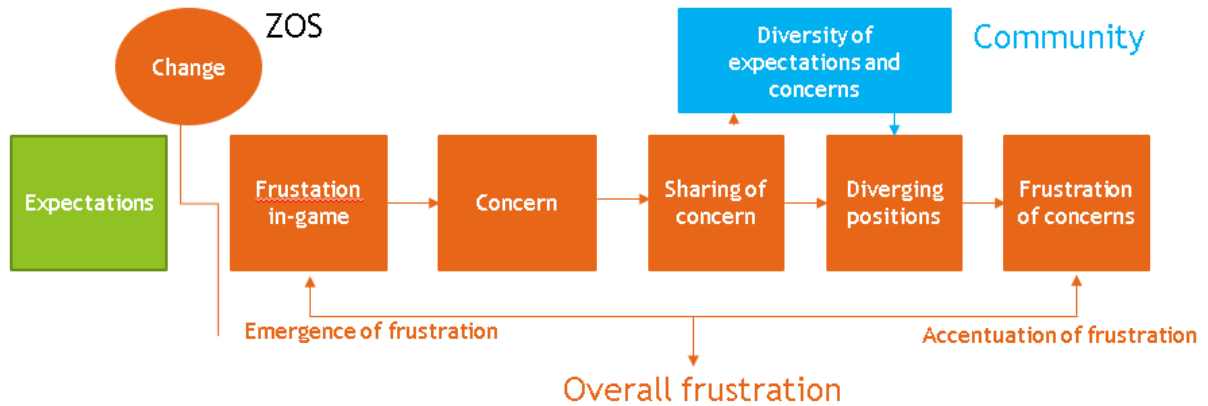
8.3 Thematic Network



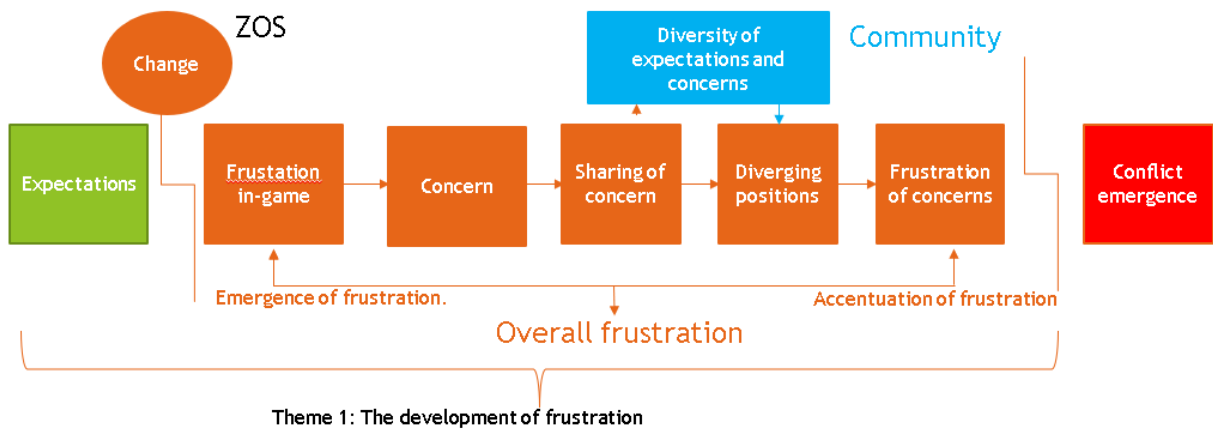
8.4 Theme 1: The development of frustration - First part of the process: The Emergence of Frustration



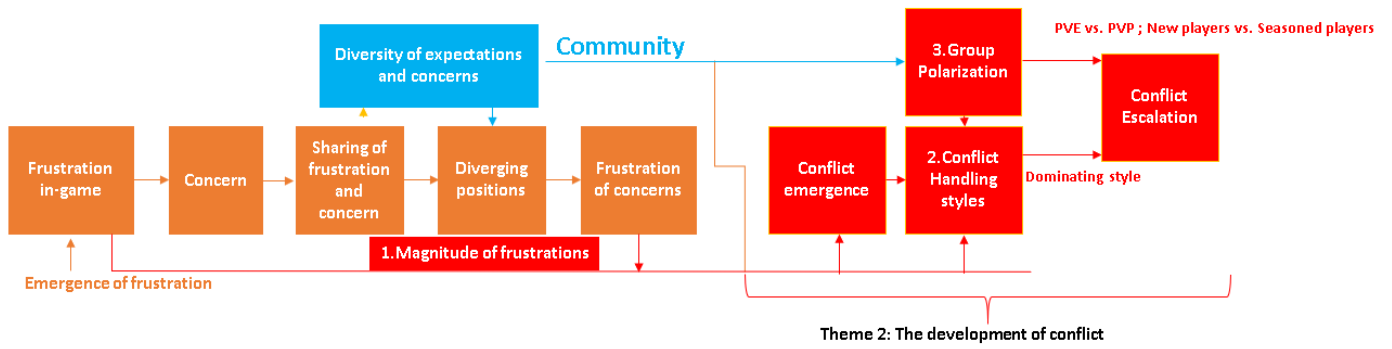
8.5 Theme 1: The development of frustration - Second part of the process – The Aggravation of Frustration through interactions



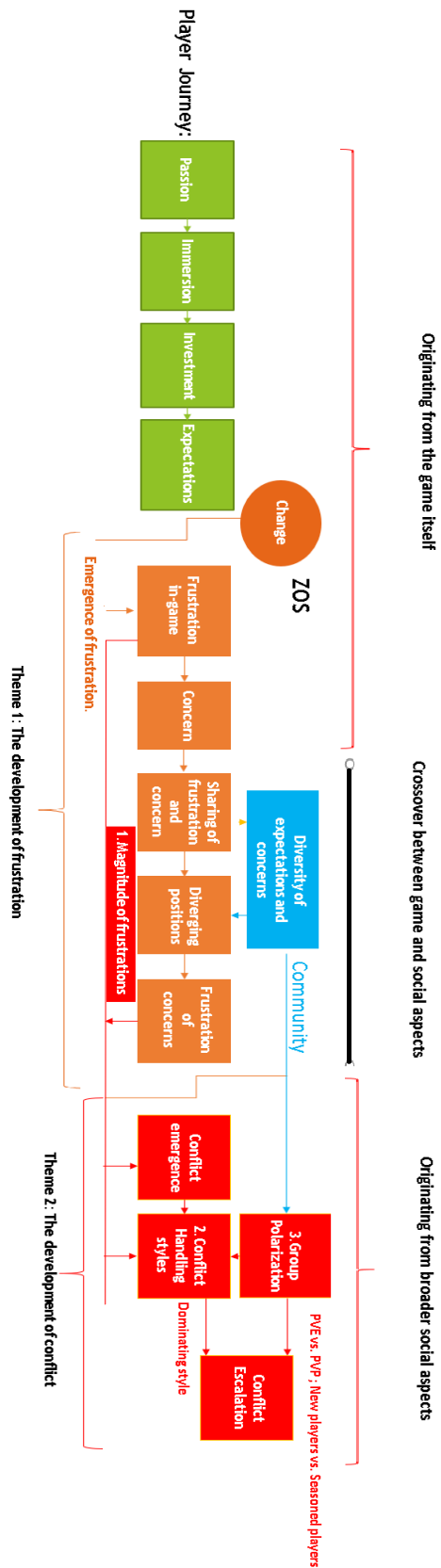
8.6 Transition between Theme 1 and Theme 2: The emergence of conflict through the Development of Frustration Theme



8.7 Theme 2: The development of conflict - The three factors and their observed interplay: Conflict Escalation



8.8 Crossover between Game Issues and Social Issues in the Dynamics of Conflict



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