Living in a world of warcraft: the complex sociality of virtual worlds

Living in a World Of Warcraft: The Complex Sociality of Virtual Worlds.

Through the convergence of gaming, the internet and Web 2. 0 technologies, the virtual worlds of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) have emerged: complex new social and cultural environments that bring with them tremendous opportunities for learning. This convergence of contexts, a defining feature of new media, combines the potential sociality of the internet with the fun and challenge of gaming, blurring the lines between entertainment, play, information, and socialization. Through fantasy-styled role-playing MMOG (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW), I will explore evidence of the benefits and drawbacks of these new forms of sociality, and examine ways in which of MMORPGs show potential to develop new social practices and ways of learning, both from a player/learner perspective and in terms of studying and understanding social dynamics of human groups on a larger scale.

WoW's enormous success exemplifies the massive social phenomenon of online gaming and virtual worlds. Released in 2004, Steinkuehler & Williams describe WoW as " the latest step in a progression of social games", referring to the many evolutions in this style of game since its early origins in Dungeons and Dragons-style pencil and paper games. Socialization and the building of relationships are central to the game, which attracts an extremely broad audience worldwide: within 5 years of release, WoW's subscriber base grew to 11. 5 million. Steinkuehler & Williams posit that - as new social environments outside of the home, school, and work - virtual worlds can provide a social context akin to " pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts".

Chat channels within the game not only facilitate in-game activities, but they also carry " constant conversation about the game and topics well beyond it", to the extent that the in-game social interaction is considered by some players to be more important than the actual gameplay. The virtual worlds of MMOGs - such as WoW's Azeroth - are " known for their peculiar combination of designed 'escapist fantasy' and emergent 'social realism'". Indeed, opportunities for socialization in virtual worlds are incredibly diverse, evidenced by the unusual records WoW holds for the " Most People at a Virtual Funeral" and " Largest Virtual Beer Festival". Real-world issues can impact the virtual world too, exemplified by WoW's annual " Running of the Gnomes", where low-level pink-haired gnome avatars – most created or " rolled" specifically for the event - run through dangerous terrain to a designated location and, by grouping together, " form a heart for breast cancer awareness".

The event raisesmoneyfor the Cleveland Clinic for vaccine research, and this year exceeded the $1, 000 goal. Such events epitomize the unique socialcultureof MMORPGs: impervious to the physical boundaries of real-world events, creative player-instigated socialization takes full advantage of the flexible socialenvironmentof the virtual world. Games, in all of their various forms, have given rise to " new forms of sociality", as evidenced by the role Communities of Practice play in-game culture. Bradford's research shows that, whether a game is designed to be played with others or not, " communities which cluster around games constantly engage in negotiations over strategies, experiences, and opinions" (2010, p. 56). Like most video games, WoW is surrounded by a powerful network of knowledge through

these Communities of Practice, consisting of " a content domain, a group of persons interested in this domain and a shared practice to increase the effectiveness of each member".

There are also communities dedicated to a seemingly endless wave of user-created media, from webcomics created using WoW screenshots to highly-produced " machinima", a convergence between games and cinema which combines film-making techniques with computer-generated imagery (CGI), rendered in real-time using game engines. Players forge reputations amongst these robust communities, participating in forums to share advice on how to advance in the game, hosting news sites, or writing FAQs and walkthroughs. Along with in-game social facilities, they make up " a crucial component of MMORPGs", necessitating the learning and development of " effective social practices" (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson & Gee, 2005, p. 106). Despite the growing popularity of gaming culture, a lack of understanding of the social contexts of gamers still produces stereotypical views of gamers, attributing to them " deviant behaviors and emotional problems".

In a recent example, Colleen Lachowicz, a Democratic Party candidate for the Maine State Senate, was the subject of a campaign organized by the Maine Republican Party in October 2012 to make public what they called Lachowicz's " bizarre double life" (Benedetti, 2012) as an orc in WoW. A website created for the campaign proclaimed " Maine needs a State Senator that lives in the real world, not in Colleen's fantasy world" (Colleen's World, 2012), and a mail-out, featuring images of Lachowicz's avatar with highlighted quotes including " I love poisoning and stabbing! and " I can kill stuff without going to jail" was posted to voters. Lachowicz's casual

comments typify the playful tone of MMOG socialization, and the misinterpretation, whether accidental or deliberate, is evidence of stereotyping due to a lack of understanding of the complex social culture of MMORPGs. When considering the social potential of MMORPGs, it is also important to acknowledge " problematic play": playing excessively at the detriment of real-life priorities and relationships.

Not all players are effected and numerous studies show that many cases of problematic play are associated with pre-existing psychopathological problems includingdepression, OCD, and low self-esteem. Certain player motivations may increase the risk of problematic play, such as reliance on online socialization and escapism as a coping strategy.

A 2011 study suggested playing with real-life friends orfamilyminimizes problematic play, by helping to retain awareness of the real world. Furthermore, such play can enhance existing relationships. While immersion - " experience(ing) the avatar as 'I'" - can play a role in developing problematic behavior, it is important to note that not all immersive play is problematic. Immersion plays a vital role in games such as WoW, allowing players to " think, talk and act in new ways" and " inhabit roles that are otherwise inaccessible to them", creating a more level playing ground for socialization and situated understanding. With their complex economic, social, political, and cultural systems and the potential to access the data of thousands of online players at any given time, MMOGs are potentially ideal environments for researching " collective human phenomena and social dynamics". In 2007, Lofgren and Fefferman suggested that WoW could be used as a tool to " substantially boost the reality quotient of disease

simulators", following an in-game epidemic of the virtual disease " Corrupted Blood" in 2005. Corrupted Blood, introduced through a downloadable update, was a highly infectious " de-buff" designed to make combat more challenging in a new area of the game, accessible only to higher level players.

A programming error allowed the disease to spread beyond the intended area into heavily populated areas of the game, " mimicking the travel of contagious carriers over long distances that have been the hallmark of many disease outbreaks in history". Lofgren and Fefferman noted that players' " dedication to the virtual community" (2007, p. 627) provoked diverse reactions - some risking their own character in an effort to heal others, others logging out in " a panic response", and some even propagating the chaos by intentionally spreading the disease - approximating to " reactions of people in real-life situations of danger", suggesting MMORPGs hold great promise in terms of measuring social dynamics and collective human response for purposes of scientific research. At its core, gaming culture relies on effective cooperation and collaboration, both in-game and through communities of practice outside of the game. Participation in video games and the communities surrounding them teaches and encourages players to engage in " effective social practices", establishing and building upon new and effective forms of entertainment, pleasure, and sociality. The success and popularity of these unique worlds have shown immense potential for further study into large-scale social dynamics and human phenomena, a potential that has yet to be fully explored. As contexts and media forms continue to converge, it seems certain that the millions of players whose

avatars inhabit the rich virtual worlds of MMORPGs and other online games will continue to create and explore new and innovative opportunities for socialization and learning.

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