A World Away: 
Inside The World Of Warcraft

By Phil Bowles

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the 
Requirements for a Degree in 
Professional Writing: Journalism/Freelance

Thursday, December 10, 2009

Submission Date 
WRT 465/Thesis Advisor: Dr. John P. Briggs
Abstract

This collection of articles provides an in-depth look at the many reasons why players start playing, continue to play, and eventually quit playing massively multiplayer online games, with the bulk of the project focusing specifically on Blizzard Entertainment’s World of Warcraft. Current and former players describe their varied gaming habits, and scholars shed light on gamers’ social and psychological motivations. The use of the digital environment as an escapist means, and the psychological conditioning present throughout the game are explored and accompanied by vivid color images in the six sections presented.
Table of Contents

Introduction
1

I
Social Studies: Virtual Socialization of Players
8

II
Refuge in Azeroth: The Game as an Escape
16

III
Psychology & World of Warcraft
20

IV
Out of this World: Leaving the Virtual Behind
32

Post-Traumatic: A Conclusion
37

Works Cited
INTRODUCTION
Thousands of men and women of varying ages stood in the line that wrapped around the Anaheim Convention Center on a typical warm late August Southern California day. Screams and cheers from the rides at Disneyland’s California Adventure, located across the street, came – many were drowned out by the dull murmur of an expanding crowd. They were all waiting anxiously for one thing – the opening day of BlizzCon 2009, a two-day celebration of all things related to Blizzard Entertainment, maker of the largest multiplayer online video game in the known universe, *World of Warcraft*.

Wrapping around a small hill, many in the line turned their attention to an elaborately dressed man standing at its peak. Though they had all spent plenty of hours behind their computer screens, the sight in their own world of a person dressed in such unique armor elicited shouts of joy from the onlookers. They immediately responded to him as though they were talking to each other within the game.

“That’s Tier 8 armor!” one man shouted, “You’ll never make it in!”

A couple nearby laughed, and joked that he would
probably just “bubble and run.” Another man, sporting a scraggly beard and wearing what appeared to be the entire stock of black clothing from a nearby thrift store, commented under his breath that he would do better if he were “from the Horde.”

“That’s a home-made costume,” said Mike Gilday, 25, of Southbury, Conn., awe in his voice, “It had to have cost him $4,000 to make…And I thought I was into this game…”

Excitement built as the crowd pushed closer to the doors of the convention center. With over 20,000 fans present that day, none seemed surprised to be waiting.

“Most of these people probably play a lot,” Gilday commented, “I wonder what the game looks like today, now that they’re all here.”

It would be two very empty days in the virtual world of Azeroth.

My Story

My introduction to the World of Warcraft came in January of 2007. I was visiting a friend – the aforementioned Mike Gilday – who had recently graduated from college. As we spent the afternoon hanging out and discussing the intricacies of our latest film-viewing endeavors, I mentioned that another film we both wanted to see was playing the following evening.

"I can't go," Gilday said, his voice relaying more than he probably intended, "I have a commitment."

I laughed and asked who the lucky girl might be. He denied it was a girl, and I persisted (rudely, I realize in hindsight) to ask what his mysterious plans might entail.
Eventually, he relented, and told me that he was scheduled for a “raid.”

"A raid?" I envisioned a bizarre scene from Animal House with my old friend in the lead.

"It would take too long to explain, but I can give you a quick demonstration if you want," he replied, acting as though I'd pulled the mask off of his secret deformed brother.

"Besides," he said, "you might want to join in some time."

I had no idea what I was watching as the vivid colors whipped across the screen. Gigantic flashes of fire and translucent blue energy leapt from all directions at a massive skeletal dragon, spurting flames not only from his mouth but also from the insides of his charred bones. Nine other players, I learned, controlled by people from all over the world and sitting behind their own computers, scurried about on the virtual ground, avoiding fiery obstacles and undead minions of the monstrosity they were attempting to destroy. Gilday tried to explain it all, but my brain couldn't grasp it. I laughed it off as he finished the demonstration, and wished him the best of luck as he continued the game.

Months later, after a devastating death in the family and the horrendous breakup of a very intense relationship, I had fallen into a deep depression. I needed a way to escape from everything. My usual vices in trying times – books, music, television – weren't cutting it, so I turned to the one place I remembered providing my friend an escape from life’s trials and tribulations - the World of Warcraft.

During the next two years, a small distraction transmogrified into a full blown addiction. I played the game anywhere from six to eight hours a day, every day of the week. I cancelled plans with friends. I skipped classes after staying up late into the
night. I stayed home from work after even later nights. When I wasn't playing, I read about the game, planning for what would be done that evening when I signed in, or reading deeper into the lore behind the gigantic world in which the game takes place – hundreds of thousands of fictional years of history, all culminating in the various quests, battles, and events within the game. While on vacation, I even called friends I had made within the game to check up on group progress.

In July of 2009, after a short break earlier in the year, I decided to leave the game entirely. I say this as if it were a commitment. Mentally, it was difficult for me to distinguish World of Warcraft from a job, minus the lack of income or a close relationship. My tenure had cost me nearly $300 dollars, countless hours of sleep, friends, lovers, and the respect of many people in my life. As I write, it has been just over four months since I logged into the game. The following writings recount my attempt to discover what drives players to immerse themselves in a faceless digital realm of psychological mazes and unending conquests, what finally drove the former players like myself away from reality and then from the game, and most importantly, how I can use my own experiences to educate others about the dangers that come along with entering the World of Warcraft.

What in the World (of Warcraft)?

Blizzard Entertainment has created one of the world's most successful online video games in history with World of Warcraft. From Shanghai to New York, Los Angeles to London, the virtual planet of Azeroth is online and available for play 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Recent advertisements, featuring such celebrities as Ozzy
Osbourne and William Shatner, tout a subscriber base of over 11.5 million people. At approximately $15 a month (the price structure varies depending on how often the subscriber chooses to pay) there is a significant profit being taken in by the company.

On its website, Blizzard describes the game as “a massively multiplayer online game (or MMORPG), *World of Warcraft* enables thousands of players from across the globe to come together online – undertaking grand quests and heroic exploits in a land of fantastic adventure.”

Blizzard does leave out a few key factors of these “grand quests.” Many of them can take hours to complete, and they can often find the player doing time consuming things such as gathering the ribs of a slain boar, or hunting for a missing child. The game also requires the player’s character to gain experience points to reach new areas of strength, gain new skills and continue on. This is referred to as “leveling,” and while the first dozen or so of these can be completed in a little over an hour of playing time, further levels may require anywhere from one to six hours. A character begins at level one and can currently reach a maximum level of 80. This is consistently raised with the addition of game expansions.

The grandiosity of the game does not take effect until a player reaches maximum level, at which time they may begin participating in what is known as “end game content,” more commonly known to players as a raid. This is what was witnessed in Gilday’s demonstration. These excursions into exclusive areas of the game typically require either 10 or 25 players and can last anywhere from three to eight hours. The content does not change at all, unless modified by the game designers based on player
feedback, and after one week, the content is reset to its original starting condition (Note: 

*In an effort to cater to a more casual player base, Blizzard has recently implemented a system which allows this reset to be extended.*).

But I had left all that behind. Inching around in the line of excited revelers to the Anaheim Convention Center, I felt like a visitor returned from another planet. Though I had been one of their number, I still had to wonder, “Why would so many people spend most of their waking hours away from reality, behind computer screens projecting images of a virtual universe?”
I

SOCIAL STUDIES:
VIRTUAL SOCIALIZATION OF PLAYERS
Michael Iamiceli is 18 years old. The Danbury, Conn. teen has been playing *World of Warcraft* since he was 14.

“A lot of my friends at school were talking about it,” he said in an interview, “so I asked my mom to get it for me.”

Since that time, Iamiceli has continued to play upwards of eight hours per day, stopping only to eat dinner and finish schoolwork. He has avoided friends, ignored his parents, and stayed online so late into the night “in game” that staying awake in school the following morning became difficult. Asked why he continues playing after four years, Iamiceli was straightforward.

“I love interacting with others online,” he replied, “I find it a lot more carefree and also easier to be sociable.”

The social element inherent in *World of Warcraft* is appealing to many, from the first-time player to a veteran such as Iamiceli. A built-in chat interface, both public and private, allowing for conversation between other players (though not with the opposing faction) is available from the first moment one signs into the game. A player may chat with other players of their own faction – either The Horde or The Alliance – about anything desired, so long as it does not publicly violate the Terms of Service agreement set forth when on sign in. This is only the tip of the proverbial social iceberg of Warcraft’s vast community.

As players advance, quests become more and more difficult to accomplish. The in-game quest tracker allows players to look at their objectives, color coding them – red, orange, yellow, green, and gray from most to least difficult – and adding a parenthetical
note next to those which are too difficult to complete alone. Certain quests show a note that says “(Group).” This requires the player to find anywhere from one to four other players, and to coordinate their efforts to achieve the quest’s goals. Another marker, “(Raid),” denotes that a player cannot complete the quest outside of a raid group. This requires a 10 or 25-player group (depending on the specific quest at hand), and a considerable amount of time and effort – anywhere from three to eight hours, based on the difficulty.

These (Raid) and (Group) quests take up the bulk of the player’s time, and constitute a major part of the virtual social scene. Using (Raid) quests as an example, an outsider can clearly see the possibility of getting hooked by the social lure of this environment.

The haunted manor of Karazhan – one of the game’s major raid areas, or “instances,” at level 70 – is the site of numerous different quests. One in particular, entitled “A Demonic Presence,” requires that the player, join with nine others to venture into the manor and fight their way through ghouls and ghosts to the peak, where they will then encounter a massive demon named Prince Malchezaar. The player is given the following information by the quest giver:

“Keanna's last few entries confirm our suspicions of a demonic presence inside Karazhan.
“She detected the arrival of a Burning Legion agent whose location she describes as coming from the top of the tower.

“Her entries stop there.

“Karazhan is a very important place, [player]. It is a portal into the nether, a beacon shining into other worlds. The possible repercussions of it falling into the wrong hands are unthinkable. This demonic intrusion must be stopped. And you, [player], are the only one with a key.”

The fight begins here to destroy the demonic presence, and all ten involved players must coordinate efforts to ensure destruction of the entity, Prince Malchezaar. The players are divided into three separate groups – tanks, damage-per-second (or DPS) and healers. Using voice-over-IP (Internet Protocol) chat software such as Ventrillo, the players shout militaristic orders through the Internet, usually referring to one another not by their actual name, but by player character name. This is done to reduce confusion in the “heat of battle.” The tank (in this raid, there is typically only one) must distract the demon and keep him facing away from the other players to minimize damage. The DPS and healer players move (as ordered by one designated player) in and around the arena in which the demon is confronted in an effort to avoid various harmful spells and creatures that the enemy will
summon. Conversation becomes minimal as the fight ensues, with players only speaking to announce a specific maneuver or requirements. If all goes well, the players will defeat the demon in about 5 minutes, and the quest will be completed.

Edward Castronova, an expert on virtual worlds and their economies, is an associate professor at Indiana University. Russ Roberts of The Library of Economics and Liberty interviewed Castronova for a podcast known as EconTalk in the fall of 2008. Castronova stressed the communal aspect of the game as being one of the key factors in attracting and keeping so many players within the world.

“It’s a very normal social environment, but it’s in this fantastic persistent world,” he told Roberts, who spent the majority of the interview astounded.

“In a virtual world,” he said, “you have every aspect of human sociality that can be imagined... because it is a society of real human beings [controlling the characters].”

Castronova was quick to note that, although the society is made up of real human beings, there is a danger for becoming addicted to the atmosphere one plays in precisely because it is not the real world.

“Unlike the real world, you have these developers who have complete freedom to structure that environment however they want,” he warned, “and since they’re a profit-seeking corporation, they’re going to structure the environment in a way that makes people happy. We don’t make the real world on those lines.”

Eli Nachtman, a 22-year-old current player from Kentucky, began playing World of Warcraft around the time the game was being beta tested in 2004. He was confident
on his reasons for staying with the game for over five years, with only minimal breaks where he “lost interest due to real life taking precedence.”

“The people [keep me playing] for sure,” he said, “The best part of gaming in general is doing it with people you know. Two of my best friends live elsewhere – one forty-five minutes away, and another that just moved to California – so it’s a good way to keep in touch with people. Why talk on the phone or something like that to keep in touch when you could slay dragons and [kill] baddies with your buds?”

Chris Vagnini, 22, of Naugatuck, Conn. had similar thoughts.

“I like some of the people in the guild,” he says, “if my two best friends stopped playing, I would probably quit too.”

Mike Gilday, the BlizzCon attendee mentioned before, also affirmed the importance of the social atmosphere within the game.

“[It’s] probably the main draw,” he explains, “Having a tight knit guild [composed of] people you consider your friends is a big reason to log in.”

What is a guild? In the community, groups of players working together on a regular basis are common. These groups, known guilds, allow players to have a standard base of online friends to help complete quests, explore vast dungeons, and socialize with on a regular basis. Types of guilds range from the casual – aimlessly wandering the game world and talking – to the extremely dedicated – spending dozens of hours a week attempting to conquer new content. Former guild leader and long-time player Ryan Tosche from Calgary, Alberta, Canada, lead the semi-casual guild know as Espionage for four years.

“Being in a guild allows you to always have people to play with,” the 21-year-old
said, “both to actually do things and to just have someone to talk to.”

The guild concept is not only the easiest way to find fellow adventurers – it is also the best way to build a social circle within the game. Many players join guilds because their friends from outside of the game are members, and then begin to make friends via the chat room interface that is visible only to those under the guild tag. It is not uncommon for these groups to also have voice-over-IP chat rooms available, where players can converse about whatever topic they desire, or to help coordinate in-game events such as raids and quests, without the need for typing.

While being in a guild is not obligatory, Tosche says that joining is an “unspoken requirement.”

“Without a guild, you’re very limited as to what you can do,” he says.

Tosche also says the social aspects of the game keep him playing. In 2007, when interviewed for a general interest piece on World of Warcraft, he said without any hesitation that he kept coming back to the game because of the community.

“All of my real life friends play,” Tosche said, using a term that is common amongst many long-term players – real life. The game has taken such precedence in the everyday lives of players that it ceases to exist as a video game, and functions as a “home away from home.”

All of the previously mentioned players continue to play to this day, and a good number of them made similar comments regarding ease of socialization throughout their interviews. Their comments lead to the inescapable conclusion: World of Warcraft is not just a hobby. It is a vehicle for players to make friends and establish relationships. Love, marriage and even divorce between players of the game are not uncommon, and in fact
seems to be a rising trend.

With all of the potentially addictive characteristics of this incredible social environment, is it possible that these players are using these aspects of the game purely for fun and communication, or is there an escapist means to it all?
II

Refuge in Azeroth:
The Game as an Escape
“I can be a Starbucks worker, or I can be a starship captain,” said Edward Castronova, an associate professor at Indiana University, in a recent telephone interview, referring to the player’s ability to change one’s persona within a digital world. Castronova is an expert on virtual worlds, with experience in many of the massive online games that have followed this movement. He applauds fantasy and fantastic thinking.

“Without fantastic thinking, we wouldn’t have scientific hypotheses,” he said with a laugh, but darkened his tone quickly. He cautioned that, while fantastic thinking might be a way to improve society “it’s really dangerous for people to be spending so much time in fantasy worlds.”

When the virtual becomes the primary reality for those, it should be asked – is this an escapist society that has been created, allowing many to be something “more” than what they feel is possible for them in the real world? Is it a way for them to be true to their inner demons without displaying their inner faces to the world?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines escapism as “the tendency to escape from daily reality or routine by indulging in daydreaming, fantasy, or entertainment.”

Castronova is quick to defend those using the games for escapist ends.

“We shouldn’t blame anyone for escaping,” he says, “because, [within our society,] there is a crisis of meaning.”

Paraphrasing the expert’s comments, and to put it in terms relative to the concepts at hand, virtually standing in front of a digital image of a demon while “hitting” it with a virtual sword is satisfying to some. Stocking oil cans on a shelf can be quite the opposite.

He further explained his comments by distinguishing the real world from the
virtual fantasy worlds which players of games such as *World of Warcraft* inhabit.

“These games,” he said with an air of danger in his voice, “say that you can come in and be something great – significant. The real world does not.”

Using fantasy as an escape and as a means to avoid reality and achieve some personal meaning is not a new concept. When J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was released in 1955, the book trilogy was an escape route for many.

“The popularity of [*Lord of the Rings*] coincided in the late fifties and sixties with a contemporary need for escape from the political and military tensions wracking the world and for stability in an increasingly unstable environment,” says Jane Chance in her book, *Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*.

Tolkien provided a base for modern fantasy gaming. As years progressed, the concepts were brought into tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then further expanded upon in 1994 with the creation of the *Warcraft* series.

Nearly fifty years later, with the release of *World of Warcraft*, many of Tolkien’s ideas were adapted into a playable online virtual world. It should then come as no surprise as the world seemingly reverts to these previous conditions of political strife, military expansion and overall instability that we see many in our culture turning to these virtual worlds as a way to feel a sense of safety and permanence. Though the *World of Warcraft* is still filled with the violence and instability our society sees – to a much more extreme degree in some cases – the ability to act on these threats and feel as though they are part of the solution to issues much larger than them is intensely attractive.

Some players are escaping more immediate threats. There is a startling jump in the amount of bullying in our school systems. This is not a new trend, but it suggests why
some would want to escape into a virtual world. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development said that, in 2005, bullies targeted more than 3.2 million kids between sixth and tenth grade.

Charlie O’Donnell, a 20-year-old from Orange, Conn., started playing World of Warcraft as a way to forget the bullying he faced every day in high school.

“I got the shit kicked out of me [every day],” he said in an interview, “In the game, I wasn't a skinny kid – I was a giant cow with a gun.”

O’Donnell said that for five years, he spent up to 12 hours per day logged in to the game world. He neglected his relationships and didn’t do any of his schoolwork. He said that he has now quit, but still plays “sparingly and secretly.”

The literature suggests O’Donnell’s story is not unique in any sense, though he was the only player to volunteer, for interviews, information about escape from specific bullying. Many young teens feeling the pressures of high school turn to online games such as World of Warcraft as a way to flee their problems, virtually recreating themselves as muscle-bound warriors and scantily clad priestesses.

The psychological aspect of living a double-life is easily understandable in a time when teens are searching for identity as often as they are their next meal, but the true psychology behind this game – the real aspect that can cause addiction – lies within a study that began three quarters of a century ago.
III

PSYCHOLOGY AND WORLD OF WARCRAFT
World of Warcraft does not come with a disclaimer saying so, but it is readily apparent to those educated in the subject: each player joining this game is subject to massive psychological conditioning, whether the game’s developer, Blizzard Entertainment, wants to admit that or not.

While working as a graduate student at Harvard in 1930, American psychologist B.F. Skinner created what is known today as the operant condition chamber. According to the eighth edition of Psychology in the New Millennium, operant conditioning is “a simple form of learning in which an organism learns to engage in certain behavior because of the effects of that behavior.” The chamber was created to study this behavior in rats. The book describe it as follows:

"The rat in [the experiment] was deprived of food and placed in an operant conditioning chamber] with a lever at one end. At first it sniffed its way around the cage and engaged in random behavior. When organisms are behaving in a random manner, responses that have favorable consequences tend to occur more frequently. Responses that do not have favorable consequences are performed less frequently.

“The rat's first pressing of the lever was inadvertent. However, because of this action, a food pellet dropped into the cage. The arrival of the food pellet increased the probability that the rat would press the lever again. The pellet is thus said to have reinforced lever pressing."
There are three segments to the standard operant conditioning chamber – the behavior, the positive reinforcement, and the frequency of the behavior thereafter. In this instance, the behavior was the rat pressing on the lever. The behavior’s positive reinforcement came in the form of the pellet being released to the hungry rat. The rat continued to press the lever after it was fed, increasing the learned behavior.

The conditioning chamber has since been expanded to include many other types of positive reinforcement. In a separate study, scientists discovered that, when electrical stimulation is applied to the pleasure centers of the brain when the lever is pressed, the rats in the experiment would also press the levers at much higher rates than normal. This led to the animals becoming addicted to the lever pressing.

So what does this hungry (or horny) little rodent pressing a lever have to do with a computer game created nearly 75 years after these experiments were first run? After all, it is just a game, right?

**Basic Training**

Once inside the *World of Warcraft*, a player must complete quests in order to expand level and fighting power. Quests start off simple: Bring this roll of paper to this man on the other side of town. Go find out what’s making the noise over by the lake. Investigate yet another abandoned mine. Things quickly become more complex, and the player’s character moves from dropping off notes to slaughtering creatures. Below is a quest example from the early levels of the game.
The player has ventured to an area known as Westfall, which for the most part resembles a giant overgrown field of wheat. There are many friends and enemies for the player in this area, but one quickly encounters Verna Furlbrow with a yellow exclamation point above her head, indicating that she holds a new quest. She offers the player this short quip followed by an order:

“I never thought the day would come when I’d leave the farm. But the fields are overrun with thieves and it's far too dangerous for us here now. As soon as Farmer Furlbrow gets the wagon fixed, we'll be on our way.

“Maybe you could do me a favor? Let me scribble down my recipe for Westfall stew. Please take it to Salma Saldean over on the farm yonder. The Saldean's farm is just beyond the fork in the road.”

The player takes the virtual item (placing it in his/her virtual “bag”) and carries it to the Saldean’s farm, which is a quick in-game “run” away from Furlbrow’s position. After reaching the farm, Salma Saldean stands just inside the farmhouse, waiting patiently with a yellow question mark over her head, signifying the end of the quest. When the player engages her, the question mark disappears.

“That Verna was always such a sweet lass. We'll miss her here in Westfall but between you and me, she's a city girl at heart and Stormwind will suit her just fine. But enough gossip! Now we can make Westfall Stew!” she says to the player, rewarding them with a small amount of experience points needed to gain further power, and then a new yellow exclamation point appears on her head. The player reengages Saldean and is
greeted with a redundant statement, and another order: “Help me make some Westfall Stew! Come back with the following ingredients: 3 Stringy Vulture Meat, 3 Goretusk Snouts, 3 Murloc Eyes, 3 Okra.”

The list shows up on the player’s Quest Tracker on the side of the screen, and it is then their job to blindly stumble through the amber fields of Westfall searching for the ingredients to this concoction of questionable value. Each ingredient can be obtained easily – the okra is found in the hands of giant robotic farm helpers, and the rest are found in the slain corpses of the various beasts that roam the area. By killing one goretusk – a nice fantasy word for a yellow boar-looking creature – the player is not guaranteed a snout. The first snout may come on the first kill, and it may come on the fifteenth kill. The same is said for the stringy meat from the vultures, and the eyes from the murlocs (tiny fish-human hybrid creatures).

The player herein learns that the killing must be completed at random, and only when the proper conditions are met will the quest be finished. To liken this to Skinner’s chamber, the behavior here is the player killing the beasts. When it is discovered that said beasts would relinquish their snouts/eyes/meat, the frequency of the behavior increases. The player has learned the basic quest completion mechanism of *World of Warcraft*.

The rewards feed a psychological hunger for approval and acceptance within the game. As a player completes more quests, rewards become more significant, at times
including some amount of virtual money – digital gold, silver, and copper coins – that allow the player to repair their armor, pay for transport to distant locations, and purchase health-replenishing food and beverages.

**Advanced Combat Training, Part 1: Computer Controlled Enemies**

Once the player reaches the highest possible level, which is 80 as of this writing, the mundane quests of tracking down goretusks and slaughtering them for their snouts have been pushed aside for matters that seem more pressing to the community. The player begins to take part in end-game content, which is decidedly more difficult than the standard hunting-and-gathering quest, and requires the participation of a total of 10 to 25 players.

In an effort to cater to a more casual player base, Blizzard created two difficulty levels in their most recent end-game content. Ten players may enter on what is known as “normal” mode, while twenty-five players may enter on a raised difficulty known as “heroic” mode. In higher difficulty levels, there may be more enemies to encounter, and the final enemy (usually referred to in relatively dated video game speak as the “boss”) may also have more abilities to attack players. The end result in killing the “boss” may also result in higher quality loot for the players, which leads us back to our operant conditioning chamber.

In the most recent game expansion to *World of Warcraft*, known as *Wrath of the Lich King*, players were granted access to the raid known as Naxxramas. The massive citadel, filled with many horror-fantasy creatures that could all be categorized as undead,
is divided into four quarters – Plague, Military, Construct, and Arachnid. A typical run through of the entire raid takes approximately 2 to 3 hours, depending on skill level.

Most groups begin their raid of Naxxramas with a stroll into The Arachnid Quarter. After encountering a few small groups of spiders – hence the name – the group comes to a large chamber. At the opposite end of the room stands a giant scarab-like creature known as a spider-lord. This is the “boss.” Named Anub’Rekhan, the monstrosity begins taunting players from the moment they enter his chamber.

“I hear little hearts beating. Yes…beating faster now. Soon the beating will stop,” the undead creature hisses at players.

Engagement begins quickly. Players communicate via voice-over-IP chat if necessary to strategically fight against the monster, avoiding his abilities as “Locust Swarm” and “Impale,” which cause severe amounts of damage. Of the ten players, two are designated for tanking – distracting the monster and taking the majority of the damage. Six of the group members will provide DPS support, attacking from either close range or from a distance depending on class and abilities. The remaining two members valiantly stand throughout the battle.
as healers, replenishing the health of players and typically helping to direct the strategies
the group uses.

Within a few minutes, the relatively short fight is over. Players then gather around
the corpse of fallen enemy, and loot items are distributed amongst the players. If a player
is not rewarded with his or her particular choice of loot, the boss will become alive and
killable once again in a week. The process can then be repeated on a weekly basis
without end. It is important to note that many “boss”-style enemies such as Anub’Rekhan
have anywhere from 10 to 25 available items, two of which are provided as rewards (or,
in game terminology, “dropped”) in the 10-player difficulty, and four of which are found
in the 25-player difficulty.

This is where the operant conditioning model comes in to play. The behavior here
is killing Anub’Rekhan. The player discovers, upon his demise, that he will relinquish
items that will in some manner increase their character’s abilities. The frequency of this
behavior increases as the player realizes that Anub’Rekhan is the first of fifteen possible
enemies that can be defeated within the Naxxramas raid, each with their own separate
caches of items that can be made available to the players upon defeat. Upon its release,
the current version of the game offered four readily available raid areas (known to players
as “instances”), with a total of eighteen boss-characters that could be defeated on a
weekly basis. This has since been expanded to nearly forty possibilities, each with higher
reward quality and increasing difficulty.

The rats keep pushing the levers to get pellets, but conditioning does not end here.

Advanced Combat Training, Part 2: Player-Versus-Player and War Games
The “war” in *World of Warcraft* is not limited to the player fighting against computer-controlled enemies. Players are allowed to compete in games that pit them against members of the opposite faction, controlled by other players, who can, in turn, provide them with rewards. This combat system is known as player-versus-player, or PVP.

Players learn from the get-go that the opposite faction is the sworn enemy. Nameplates, which show a character model’s chosen moniker, are divided into two colors – green for the player’s faction, and red for the enemy. The red nameplate is applied to computer-controlled enemies, which can take the form of an angry wolf on a forest path or one of the aforementioned boss-level enemies, but the division amongst players beyond the choice of siding with The Horde or The Alliance is taken to a higher level here as player-controlled enemies are also labeled with this color.

The PVP events within the game are based largely on two childhood war games – Capture the Flag and King of the Hill. From behind their screens, players charge onto the battlefield and attack with the goal of bringing glory and honor to their faction. Each kill provides a certain number of “honor” points, which can be later spent to improve armor, weapons, and other personal affects.

The operant conditioning model is in use here. The player is once again the subject of the conditioning, and the behavior at this point is the killing of enemy players. The positive reinforcement comes in the form of honor points. As players realize that these points can be spent to make themselves more powerful, the behavior increases.

The rat in the box has learned how to press another lever.
As mentioned in the previous article, players from opposing factions do not have any contact with one another outside of the warring confrontations. This faceless form of combat is a precursor to what is now occurring within our military.

Unmanned Aerial Systems, or UAS, are becoming increasingly popular as a method of combat. According to a 2003 article from Wired Magazine, a UAS “can carry at least 1,000 pounds of precision-guided bombs and be pre-programmed on the ground or have its mission plan changed mid-flight.” Though this may seem unrelated, the process of controlling a UAS is strikingly similar to a video game: trained soldiers sit behind an array of computer screens, an oddly familiar joystick in hand, watching as the machine carries out the ‘dirty work’ of completing the mission given. Is there a difference between a fictitious person that is being torn down in the heat of battle (only to respawn, or come back to life, after six minutes), and a real person who is losing his real life? On screen, it is difficult to tell.

Modern warfare is slowly turning into a video game for many of our men and women in the line of duty, and we have yet to see the results within our society due to the recent developments of the technology. Post-traumatic stress is defined in many ways in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), though there is absolutely no mention of digital experiences being involved within the traumas. Though not apparent at the moment, it is a potential and credible danger that the decisions being
made by the men and women controlling these machines will have an impact on them in their future lives.

When asked if addiction was possible after such strenuous conditioning, Indiana University’s Edward Castronova answered interestingly.

“I hear people say ‘I’m addicted to this game,’ and they’re saying that in a positive way. It means that [they’re] having so much fun in this environment that [they] just don’t have any desire to go anywhere else.”

Fourteen players responded to the request for an interview for this project, which included the following question: “Have you ever considered yourself addicted to the game?” Seven of these players still currently log in and play on a regular basis. Of these, only two responded that they were addicted.

Eli Nachtman, a college student from Kentucky, considers himself addicted to the game, and was eager to speak on the subject.

“[I’m addicted] only because nothing else really has the potential to take so much of your time if you think about it,” Nachtman says, continuing, “Nothing you do for fun is really immersive enough to suck you in for hours everyday and keep you intrigued and coming back for more.”

Doug Alley also considers himself addicted. The 22-year-old from Middlebury, Conn., says that he keeps playing because, as he put it, “I’d rather spend 15 dollars a month playing a video game with my friends then spend 15-20 dollars a night down at the local bar.”

He is also very candid about his addiction to the game.
“Yeah, I'm addicted,” he said, adding “But I've been addicted to a ton of video games.”

Though he has taken breaks from the game to tour as a drummer with his progressive rock band, he says that since starting to play two years ago, “there has been no looking back.”

“What can I say?” he mused at the end of our interview, “I’m a gamer at heart and I always will be.”
IV

OUT OF THIS WORLD:
LEAVING THE VIRTUAL BEHIND
After being fully conditioned, staying within the *World of Warcraft* is an obvious choice for many players. They now belong to a digital society that accepts and rewards them (for a nominal $15 a month) and allows them to take part in gigantic quests that can impact the world around them. In short, their lives now have meaning.

Why, then, do so many people leave the game?

Of the fourteen players interviewed for this project, seven of them had left the game for good. Asked if they considered their playing an addiction, five of them responded that it was. At the height of their playing, these five players spent an average of approximately 50 hours within the game per week.

James B., a 25-year-old customer service representative, used the game as an escape from his negative home situation at the time.

“I played for many years,” he said, “[I found that the game] added to my negative emotion, weight, activity, and social issues.”

James claims to have quit for “several reasons,” citing none specifically, though he concluded that he “[felt excessive gaming] was unhealthy and detrimental to my social life [and] my life in general.”

Michael Hartwell is a 28-year-old former newspaper editor from Gorham, Maine. He, like many others, joined *World of Warcraft* for the social atmosphere.

“I started playing because my girlfriend at the time wanted to use it to ‘hang out’ with friends from her old college,” he said in an email interview, “We broke up, but I had made different friends with people on my server — a couple people I sort of knew in college but mostly people I met there.”
Hartwell played the game for nearly four years before quitting in June of 2009. He was a consistent, well-liked player within his guild, known for his humor and sharp wit, both in text and in speech. When asked why he stopped playing, he responded interestingly.

“The real question is why didn’t I stop earlier?” he replied, “The game itself consisted of a series of chores in order to have some real fun slaying dragons. Eventually, the chores consumed the vast majority of my time in the game.”

After months or even years of play, many players begin to reach similar conclusions to those of Hartwell, and subsequently leave the game. The operant conditioning, militaristic digital lifestyle, and even the social factors begin to wear thin and the game becomes exactly what Hartwell has described: a chore.

“Veronica,” who requested her real name withheld from the project, joined for reasons similar to Hartwell. The 20-year-old college student says she played “sporadically” over the course of three years, but her choice to return to the game each time involved a significant other.

“Each time I made an account, it was because I had a boyfriend who played,” she said, “some of the only ways I got to spend time with them was through questing.”

She finally quit (“For good,” she says) in the summer of 2009 after another relationship heavily involving the game ended. Upon deciding to leave the game, “my family was happy,” she shared, “They always said [the game] was a waste of my time and money.”
Veronica had no qualms talking about her reasons for leaving the game. “I stopped playing WoW for two main reasons. It interfered with my schoolwork. Instead of doing my homework assignments I would go and complete quests instead. It also got to be too expensive. Fifteen dollars a month really added up after a while, especially since I only worked part time at a mall job for minimum wage.”

Allen Campman considered himself addicted to World of Warcraft. “It consumed my life,” he says, “I wanted to play [the game] before I wanted to do anything else.”

Though the 18-year-old from Murieta Hot Springs, California, mentioned the “life consuming” nature of the game multiple times during the course of an email interview, but was still able to quit of his own free will. Like Veronica, Campman’s family was “shocked and very happy” to hear of the abandonment of his digital life.

Ashley Widman also considered herself addicted to World of Warcraft. “I still want to play now,” she said when asked about the game months after quitting, but now despises the digital behemoth after witnessing its transformative effects on her life. “I gained weight and became lazy,” the Newburgh, New York college student relayed in an interview, “I went a summer without working which is not typical. I would be better off financially.”

She claimed to have also been “nearly thrown out of her house” due to her lack of motivation to do anything else caused by the game. Widman said that, though she is aware of the negative effects the game may have on her life, she would go back to playing if given the opportunity.
“I’m not exactly sure why,” she said at the conclusion of the interview.

Money, personal health, a lack of physically real socializing, even pure boredom – former players gave all of these reasons for leaving. What happens if the addiction is too deep? Is it possible to remove oneself from this game with external help?

Outside of Redmond, Washington, on July 27, 2009, the reSTART Internet Addiction Recovery Program was founded as means of helping those hooked on games such as *World of Warcraft* and other digital demons such as texting, online shopping, online gambling, social networking, and pornography. Though they were unable to be reached for comment for this particular project, the center’s website provides a clear statement of their mission.

“The reSTART Internet Addiction Recovery Program is specifically oriented towards launching tech dependent youth and adults back into the real world,” the site states, “We understand that Internet and gaming addiction often co-occurs with other mental health conditions. Our program is individually designed to address a wide variety of underlying issues which may contribute to excessive Internet use.”

For some, the never-ending game, with all of the social provisions and psychological conditioning, can find a suitable ending.
POST-TRAUMATIC: A CONCLUSION
When I began this project, I had one goal in mind: to discover the reason that my friends and colleagues continued to play *World of Warcraft*. I falsely believed the answer would be simple. As I dug deeper into the inner workings of the game, my desire for an answer became a quest.

Yes. I said *that* word again. A quest.

My time playing *World of Warcraft* has since passed, but was I the one who made it out “alive?” Many of the friends I had made across North America still play the game on a regular basis. They still quest endlessly in a world that does not age. They participate in the raids that last for hours, concluding in the early hours of the morning before continuing the next night. They wait, week after week, as the fights continue, hoping that the one piece of loot that they so desperately need will be discovered on the corpse of a fallen enemy.

They are trapped.

I have seen what this game can do to those who are susceptible. It is a financial hole. It can destroy relationships. It can consume lives so severely, eating hours upon hours of vital *life* that can be experienced, that it becomes a wonder to those who are familiar with its workings – those who have played, fallen victim to the pleasures, and walked away – that a game like this can even exist.

Discussions with my classmates have likened my situation to the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva. I have been enlightened by my research, and though nirvana is attainable in leaving the game behind, I feel it necessary to help others along the path and hope that they too may find a way to relieve themselves from the burdens that they have placed upon their own shoulders as players in this game.
In my research, I sought out many interview subjects. The biggest source from which I hoped to receive some sort of information was the progenitor of *World of Warcraft* itself, Blizzard Entertainment. I knew that an outright admission of psychological conditioning would be near impossible to achieve, so I requested basic information – a rough estimate of player demographics. Though many emails were sent, only one response was received on October 5, 2009. The answer to my request, strange as it may be, is included below:

“Hello Phil,

“Thanks for contacting us. I’m the PR Assistant here at Blizzard. Please understand that we receive a large number of requests for research assistance from students, and unfortunately we do not have the resources available to provide this help.

We wish you the best on this project, and thank you for wishing to include us in this research.

Cheers,

Lyndsi Revis

Public Relations Assistant

Blizzard Entertainment”

I find it highly unlikely that a company with a game that has a subscriber base of 11.5 million players, each paying approximately $15 per month to play – thus making an approximate $2 billion dollars a year in subscription costs alone – does not have “the
resources available” to provide demographic information, even if it were in a public relations sense.

Blizzard didn’t want any dirt on their shiny toy.

After weeks without any contact, I drove in the darkness down the slightly foggy roads of Southbury to the home of Mike Gilday. We had lost touch earlier in the fall when he had gone on vacation to Maine for two weeks, and I had become heavily involved in my school and work priorities.

I pulled into his long gravel driveway, switching my headlights onto the “high” mode so that I could see any roaming creatures that might happen to cross the path of my car. After pulling in and turning around, I called him to let him know I was there.

“Be out in a minute,” he said.

I sat in the darkness and thought back to the day we spent at the Anaheim Convention Center. It had been nearly three months earlier, but I could still remember everything as though it had happened hours before. The entire concept still shocked me, and I couldn’t believe that I had willingly attended.

The punchy noise of an attempt at entry into the car startled me from my memories. I hadn’t unlocked the door.

Gilday quickly sat down and buckled his seatbelt as we hurried towards a quick dinner followed by the latest blockbuster movie. We exchanged quick updates on our lives, and then the inevitable question came to light.

“So,” I asked him, afraid of the answer I might receive, “how is the game going?”
I always asked him, even though I hadn’t played in months. I still wanted to keep in touch with the friends I had made, but there was no intention whatsoever of returning to the electronic phenomena that so many still enjoyed.

“To be honest, I’m getting bored with it,” he said to my amazement.

Gilday went on to tell me that the game had become just what Michael Hartwell described in his responses months earlier – a chore. He said that he found himself wanting to leave raids early, and that the days where he didn’t play were beginning to heavily outnumber the days when he did.

I finally mustered up the courage to ask the one question that had never come up between us, even when my days in World of Warcraft were coming to a close.

“Are you going to quit?” I asked, pretending to pay attention to the road but seeking out and kind of reaction I could as the words permeated his brain.

He was silent for at least a minute. The sounds of a live performance by Phish – more than likely a recording from the summer’s reunion tour – fell like a wall between us.

“The thought has crossed my mind,” he said as the song ended, “I’ve been playing a lot of other games, and I’ve spent a lot of time away it. It just isn’t keeping my attention like it used to.”

We left it at that. I never asked him anything further about it, and he never offered any information on his decision. We both knew where it was eventually headed. Four years of play within the sprawling pixilated hills of Azeroth’s continents would soon come to a close for Mike Gilday.
“Besides,” he said as we shot further down the highway, “there’s this other game coming out soon…”

I laughed to myself. For a moment, I thought it had ended. Then I realized the truth – the game doesn’t ever end at all.

You just start over.


Bowles, Phil. A Visit To Azeroth. Written November 2007 for WRT 271W, Human Interest Writing

Web


Podcast

Interviews

Gilday, Michael. Email, Face-to-face INTERVIEW. 26 September 2009

“Veronica.” Email, Face-to-face INTERVIEW. 29 September 2009

Alley, Doug. Email, Face-to-face INTERVIEW. 2 October 2009

Iamicelli, Michael. Email INTERVIEW. 3 October 2009

Nachtman, Eli. Email INTERVIEW. 3 October 2009

Vagnini, Chris. Email, Telephone INTERVIEW. 3 October 2009

Tosche, Ryan. Email, Voice-over-IP INTERVIEW. 4/5 October 2009

O’Donnell, Charlie. Email, Face-to-face INTERVIEW. 4 October 2009

Campman, Allen. Email INTERVIEW. 5 October 2009

Nguyen, Lien. Email, Telephone INTERVIEW. 5 October 2009

Hartwell, Michael. Email, Telephone INTERVIEW. 5/6 October 2009

B., James. Email, Telephone INTERVIEW. 6 October 2009

Widman, Ashley. Email, Instant Message INTERVIEW. 6 October 2009

Castronova, Edward. Telephone INTERVIEW. 8 October 2009

Gil, Cristian. Email, Instant Message INTERVIEW. 26 October 2009
Works Cited – Page 3

Images

Page 2:
Image 1 by Phil Bowles, taken August 21, 2009
Image 2 from www.blizzard.com, used without permission.

Page 10, 11, 19, 23, 24, 25:
Images from www.wowwiki.com, used without permission.

Page 21
Image from psychology.uiowa.edu, used without permission.

Page 29
Image from www.defense-update.com, used without permission.

Page 34
Image provided by Michael Hartwell