



Enhancing one life rather than living two: Playing MMOs with offline friends

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 2 February 2011

Keywords:

Computer games
Social ties
Immersion
Internet addiction
Problematic MMO play

ABSTRACT

We use ethnographic, interview, and survey data to examine problematic play within the popular online game, *World of Warcraft*, or 'WoW' for short. Research shows that players drawn to the interpersonal dimensions of online games are more prone to experience negative outcomes associated with their computer use. Our study suggests that it is not only *whether* online gamers seek meaningful social interactions that determine if *WoW* play becomes problematic, but exactly *how* players interact with others in online game-worlds. Specifically, levels of problematic *WoW* play depend on the extent gamers play with offline or 'real-life' friends and relations. Our survey data reveals both a *direct* relationship between playing *WoW* with offline friends and problematic online gaming and also an *indirect* one mediated by 'immersion' (defined as the extent that players feel like they are *in* a virtual world and in some cases *actually* their character). Interpreting these results through ethnographic and interview data, we suggest that playing *WoW* with real-life-friends allows gamers to transfer in-game accomplishments and experiences into offline social networks. Rather than competing and conflicting with the world outside of the game, *WoW* played in this way tends to enhance gamers' offline lives. Further, by keeping gamers in touch with perspectives outside of *WoW*, playing with real-life-friends instills critical distance and greater awareness of how excessive play can damage offline commitments and relationships, allowing gamers to better monitor, evaluate, and ultimately regulate excessive game-play.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

Massively multiplayer online role playing games ('MMORPGs' or 'MMOs' for short) are growing in popularity, melding as they do "the fun and challenge of video games with the social rewards of an online community" (Seay & Kraut, 2007, p. 829). For example, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), the MMO that is the focus of this study, reached 11.5 million monthly subscribers in 2008, pointing to this game's particular appeal (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008a). However, a certain percentage of MMO gamers play, in their own estimations, *excessively*, their commitment to online fun and friends conflicting with and even eclipsing in importance their offline lives (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2002; Kraut et al., 1998). Unable to successfully negotiate on- and offline existences, these gamers' play becomes 'problematic'—the source of not only fun but also anxiety, distress, and conflict (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Davis, Flett, & Besser, 2002; Seay & Kraut, 2007; Yee, 2002, 2007b).

In this article, we explore whether gaming online with friends and family also known offline – or, 'in real-life' (IRL), to reference the imperfect and surely misleading term employed both by our respondents and certain scholars from whose research we draw – might minimize problematic MMO play.¹ We hypothesize that gaming in this way might help players bridge their on- and offline existences, and also to better monitor, evaluate, and regulate potentially problematic patterns of play, thus allowing *WoW* experiences to enhance and strengthen rather than compete and interfere with offline lives. To test our ideas, we use a combination of ethnographic, interview, and survey methods. After grounding our study with respect to relevant literature and also describing in more detail

¹ In research of direct relevance to our own, both Clark (2006) and Seay and Kraut (2007) speak of 'real-life friends' to refer to relationships that include important offline components. In using this same phrasing, we do not mean to imply that online friends are not 'real'—they surely are. Rather, we follow our respondents and other scholars and use this terminology as a convenient shorthand to signal that exclusively online interactions and activities are both somewhat separate and different from those with important offline components, though researchers vigorously debate the form and extent of such separations and differences. For more on the difficulties of how to speak of 'virtual' places like MMOs—each of which may exhibit varying degrees of sensorial realism—as they are separated from but also embedded within life offline, see Agre (1999), Bainbridge (2007a, 2007b), Golub (2010), Wilson and Peterson (2002). For a critique of the more general 'magic circle' idea that games are different and separated from the so-called 'real' world, see Malaby (2007).

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our research hypotheses and methodology, we present our findings. This is followed by a more general discussion of the meaning and significance of these results in relation to current debates about 'problematic' MMO play.

1.2. *WoW and MMO play*

With its 11.5 million monthly subscribers, *World of Warcraft* is the largest subscription-based MMO and virtual community in the West, about 62% of this part of the world's MMO population when the game's subscribers peaked in 2008 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008b). Online realities like *WoW* offer a *persistent virtual world* where thousands of users interact in a setting that endures independently of any particular player. In *WoW*'s case, the fictitious world that forms the back-drop to this virtual place persists 24 h a day with only brief interruptions for maintenance. Of equal importance is that these massively multiple play spaces are highly *immersive*, stemming in part from powerful 3D graphics that produces absorptive spaces that feel virtually real. The way one's *avatar*, or visual representation of one's character-self, responds to commands, adds to this sensation, as do the mentally and emotionally absorbing quests and plot-lines. Players easily become immersed, feeling as if they actually inhabit another space, losing awareness of the so-called 'real' world, so that consciousness can be said to reside in the virtual space (Castronova, 2005).

WoW offers gamers seemingly endless ways to play and tasks to accomplish, which generally increase in complexity, time necessary to complete, and rewards as they advance in the game. Many tasks are in the form of *quests* with specific goals offered by computer-controlled non-player characters ("NPC's"). Players can accept these quests, travel virtually to accomplish them, and then return to the quest NPC for rewards of treasure and experience points. Just exploring the world, and thus gaining in knowledge as a player, brings many gamers satisfaction as well as specific in-game rewards. Other players more specifically pursue advancement in *levels*, which bestow additional power and ability on a given character, helping them to complete more difficult game challenges, in turn allowing them to advance even further in the game.

Even after completing the game's highest level, many players decide to compete in highly challenging in-game content such as multiplayer *instances* like *dungeons* or *raids* requiring hours of cooperation between 5 and 40 players with groups balanced between different character classes. *WoW* encourages social interaction and collaboration, and many players find collaborative tasks such as *raids* among the most rewarding aspects of the game. However, because of the social obligations involved to reciprocally help others with their own quests and in-game tasks such as raiding, these collaborations can also lead to heavy demands on player times and thus can add stress to players' lives.

WoW shares some features with social network programs like *Facebook* in bringing people together in a shared virtual space to chat, share ideas and information, and simply socialize. Still, distinct from social networking sites, massively multiplayer game-worlds like *WoW* set the stage for collaborative and simultaneously shared play interactions that seem as real as they are fun, unfolding as they do in a meticulously rendered fantasy world and via avatar-characters who, in many instances, come to feel like second selves.

1.3. 'Problematic' MMO play

A growing body of scholarship speaks of 'internet addiction,' implicitly comparing excessive and out-of-control online behaviors with the abuse of certain substances like alcohol or drugs (Bai, Lin,

& Chen, 2001; Holden, 2001; Mitchell, 2000; Young, 1998a, 1998b; Young & Rogers, 1998). Nevertheless, this and similar problems have not as yet been recognized in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV, 1995). Proposed revisions to this manual would include 'internet addiction' in an appendix rather than classifying it as a full-fledged addiction – modeling the concept after addictions to gambling (Young, 1998a, 1998b; Young & Rogers, 1998) – which suggests some professional psychiatric ambivalence about the phenomenon (Holden, 2010).

Given the contested nature of the phenomenon, many scholars refer to potentially excessive Web activity as 'problematic internet usage' (PIU), rather than as 'internet addiction' (Yellowlees & Marks, 2007). Nevertheless, scholars typically associate PIU with symptoms analogous to those of classic addiction, such as compulsion to stay online, cognitive preoccupation with online activity, maladaptive use of the internet to regulate mood, experiences of withdrawal when unable to use the internet, preference for online to offline interactions, spending excessive time online, and experiencing disruptions to work and relationships because of online activity (e.g., Caplan et al., 2009; Yee, 2002, 2007b). The term 'PIU' is used to avoid connoting drug abuse, a labeling that might lead to 'moral panics' rather than objective understandings (Golub & Lingley, 2008). Indeed, a term such as 'addiction' can seem to attribute an almost chemical-like content and structure of the internet that propels players into addictive cycles of play and dependency, a set of assumptions that have yet to be demonstrated (Holden, 2010; Seay & Kraut, 2007; Yee, 2002). Scholars speaking of PIU instead focus on the negative personal and interpersonal consequences to which certain forms of internet usage can contribute, such as conflicts between online and offline commitments, the erosion of school, jobs, and relationships, and ultimately anxiety and emotional distress. As Seay and Kraut (2007, p. 830) put it, describing MMO play in particular: "online gaming would become problematic when it dominates and displaces other behaviors, leads to conflict, or when inability to play causes anxiety". That is, they treat PIU as a measure of self-professed personal distress, which need not name the origins of such problematic behavior, be these found in the content and structure of the internet itself or within individual psyches and social relations. Again, Seay and Kraut (2007, p. 830) say, this time echoing ideas found in Charlton, 2002: "Problematic use can be operationalized as consumption of an entertainment product in such amounts or at such times that it causes demonstrable problems in the user's real life extreme enough to cause an individual to identify and report them."

In fact, a variety of researchers prefer to speak of PIU only in reference to specific online activities, such as gambling, email, or pornography, suggesting that each may have its own etiology and particular consequences (Yellowlees & Marks, 2007; Yee, 2007b). And an expanding body of research examines problematic use of online games, studied more narrowly apart from PIU conceived as a general phenomenon (Caplan et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2002; Seay & Kraut, 2007; Yee, 2007b; Yellowlees & Marks, 2007). As in studies of PIU more broadly conceived, researchers into the meanings and consequences of problematic MMO play generally search for personal and interpersonal factors associated with excessive MMO usage, rather than focusing on the drug-like qualities of MMOs themselves. For example, in relation to personal factors, studies have found associations between problematic MMO play and pre-existing psychological distress related to depression, anxiety, introversion, impulse control, and loneliness (Caplan et al., 2009; Nalwa & Anand, 2003; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Seay & Kraut, 2007; Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & McElroy, 2000; Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003; Young & Rogers, 1998), and also between problematic MMO activity and gamers'

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