

# The Thin Line Between Reality and The World of Warcraft

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Role playing games have been around for decades and have been enjoyed by many different people since its creation. These games give the participants the opportunity to enter and experience a different world where they take on new roles and responsibilities. I have never personally been an avid fan of these fantasy games but many people I know hold these realities as important as their own. Some devote more of their time to these games and its reality than they do to their own.

I chose to research the people who play World of Warcraft because it has been the largest and most popular role playing game of all time.<sup>1</sup> This game has a network of members from all over the world and brings people from many walks of life together into a virtual world where they can interact and work together to accomplish goals dictated by the game. I will discuss the culture surrounding the people who play this game and the details and objectives of this games reality.

Most of the information I gained for this paper came from two primary informants. Lucas Groce is a friend I have had for years and is twenty-one years old. He has played World of Warcraft since its release in 2004 and continues to be a very frequent player until this day.<sup>2</sup> He has spent more time playing this game than anyone else I know and is practically infatuated with this online reality.

My second informant is named Logan Conover and he played this game avidly for the first five years it was out.<sup>3</sup> He does not play the game at all anymore but still has

a vast knowledge of the world and continues to keep up with the details of the story. He was at one point considered by many around here to be the best and most knowledgeable on the subject of World of Warcraft.

## The History of the role playing game

Before I get into the aspects of World of Warcraft culture I want to give brief description of the games predecessors to help provide context. Most of the information about the games that preceded World of Warcraft came from Logan who had a brother that first introduced him to this type of gaming. He has experience with many of these fantasy role playing games and was the precursor to his interest in playing World of Warcraft.<sup>4</sup>

All games you play these days usually have you buy into a certain story or reality but this does not constitute a role playing game.<sup>5</sup> Role playing games are never ending and are always expanding. The character you make always has a new objective to accomplish and new abilities and skills that they can learn. Logan points out that this is what separates them from your average video games. You're average game has an ending and a certain route you are forced to follow.

One of the original role playing games was "Dungeons and Dragons" created in 1974.<sup>6</sup> It was the first popular one which was based on a game called "Miniature War" gaming.<sup>7</sup> Logan says he remembers a friend of his brother who played this "Miniature War". This game involved tactical thinking and was played with miniature characters on modeled terrain which was the main components of game play. Logan remembers the

miniature characters that his brother's friend had painted himself and was overly protective of them. Dungeons and Dragons was a large expansion on this idea. It allowed you to create your own character that you would use every time you played which meant you did not reset back to zero whenever you started a new game.<sup>8</sup> You kept up with your statistics, abilities, and level yourself on a piece of paper.

In Dungeons and Dragons you appoint a "Dungeon Master" which acts as the referee and provides the narration of the adventures and directives of the player.<sup>9</sup> Lucas pointed out that this role acts as the moderator of the game. He also has choices such as what type of monsters the players encounter and the general direction the game takes. Depending on the type of character the player chooses when they first begin the game allows them certain specialties in health, attack, magic, and other key components of the game. Players often play this on a table top and surround the board much like a typical board game.<sup>10</sup>

Both Lucas and Logan remember playing this game for a couple of years. They said this was really the first time either of them had played a role playing game. You also have a choice of playing as a team to accomplish objectives which often are referred to as playing in a "party" which they often did. This game is open ended and can theoretically be played over and over without having much repeat in scenarios.

## Warcraft's Beginning

As technology progressed and personal computers became popular and capable of doing extraordinary things, gaming came close behind. "Warcraft: Orcs & Humans" first

released in 1994 was a precedent to the “World of Warcraft” game.<sup>11</sup> It was referred to as a real time strategy game where you commanded a virtual army to beat an opposing player with their own virtual army at their command. This was not exactly a role playing game as a war strategy game but it did set up the premise for the now popular “World of Warcraft”.

There have been many games of the same genre that followed this original one which included different characters and maps. Logan said these were the popular games that fans of “Dungeons and Dragons” started playing. Not only were these rich with story and fantasy but also required a certain level of intelligence to play which is what attracted fans of role playing games. This transition laid the ground work for the gamers that now play World of Warcraft.

## Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games or MMORPG is the pinnacle in the evolution of role playing games.<sup>12</sup> This type of roll playing game is the largest in scale and in the amount of people who play it. Unlike “Dungeons and Dragons” where a few friends come together to interact and roam in a narrated reality; members of a MMORPG interact with millions of players from all over the world and do so from the comfort of their home.<sup>13</sup> The world is self-sustaining and continues to grow even if you are not active in it.

There were several different types of these game introduced but the creation of “World of Warcraft” abolished its predecessors in popularity by a landslide<sup>14</sup>. For 2010

it is estimated that there are over twelve million subscribers to the game with an accumulation of over a billion dollars in revenue since its creation.<sup>15</sup> The industry is ever evolving, offering special expansion packs to the world that changes the maps and progresses the storyline of the world.

These games provide a very large world for the player to explore and interact with. You must have a subscription to play online and also specific software from the company in order for it to function on your computer. Due to the massive amount of people who are online at any given moment there are hundreds of different servers the players are distributed across. These servers consist of the exact same maps and quests. In order to play with someone you know it is necessary to belong to the same server.<sup>16</sup>

## World of Warcraft

“World of Warcraft” is often referred to as WOW by the people who plays the game often. In order to play the game you must have a computer that can run the software you have to install.<sup>17</sup> The software is often priced around fifty dollars and this does not include the expansions which allow you to have access to the whole games potential. On top of this there is a fifteen dollar a month subscription fee that you have to pay in order to connect to the online network.<sup>18</sup>

The game has a virtual culture that corresponds with the story surrounding this world. People who start playing WOW have to adopt and learn the rules and details of this world in order to properly socialize into it.<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to function in this world and play properly without learning the responsibilities and roles you take on in it.

Most of the appeal of the game is in its story and new responsibilities that you can not obtain in reality.

The story of this world begins with a civil war between the beings of the world who are the “Horde” and the “Alliance”.<sup>20</sup> The “Alliance” consists of humans and other beings and is considered the good guys of the game. The “Horde” consists of beastly-like characters that are generally seen as the evil entities of the world. After beings from another dimension invade this world, they are forced to reconcile and fight them together. This is where you begin in the game.<sup>21</sup>

You have many options in the characters you can choose. Each have one of three important abilities that are needed to progress fully in the game. “Tanks” are characters in the game that can take the most damage and when playing in groups are responsible for keeping the attention of the enemy on them and absorbing most of the damage. “DPS (Damage per Second)” are characters that inflict the most damage in the games when playing with a group<sup>22</sup>. “Healers” are characters that keep everyone alive while they carry out their roles in the fight. All three of these characters are needed to carry out a large fight in the game. There are also hybrid characters that can do all three but not as successfully as the others.<sup>23</sup>

Depending on the type of character you use changes the game play quite a bit. This is a free roam type of game where you can go anywhere in the virtual world. If you are playing without a group you will mainly be doing “quests”, where a small task are given to the player and you’re rewarded by money, items, or equipment. Money is received as gold and can be gained in different ways. It can be used to buy things you need in the world.<sup>24</sup>

Groups you play with on WOW are referred to as “guilds”.<sup>25</sup> Many people play this game mainly for this aspect of it. Guilds are formed in several different ways depending on what you want to accomplish. “Dungeons” are referred to the larger battles in which you need a guild to defeat the enemies. This is where the Tanks, DPS, and Healers come into play. You need all three of these abilities functioning among the characters fluidly in order to be successful in the battle. This is where most of the socializing between the online players occurs.

The main objective of this game is to level your character up by defeating and carrying out all the objectives the world has to offer. Your character starts out at level one and as you level up it takes longer and more experience to reach the next one. The top level you can reach is eighty-five. Reaching level eighty-five does not mean the game is over. There are usually still battles and objectives to complete but even if you have done all of them there is always equipment and items that you need to obtain.<sup>26</sup>

## Life of the WOW Gamer

Lucas plays this game currently about every moment he is awake. He has no job right now so this virtual reality has become his own. This is a common phenomenon on WOW. His sleeping, eating, and other social habits are all dictated by the game unless something very important happens that he has to take care of. He says that the reason he plays this so much is because it is a nice break from his real life. I believe though that when he is in modes where he plays as much as he does now, that is pretty much his real life.

Logan was the same way a couple of years ago but has actually kind of grown out

of this mentality. The game seems to satisfy all their entertainment and social needs. They interact with real people through this virtual world through online text boxes and programs that allow them to connect through audio. This is some of the only consistent social interaction they receive. If they do interact with people in real life it is usually with someone else who plays the game as well. At the moment Lucas has his computer at a buddy's house that also plays WOW. They play this game everyday and keep up with the responsibilities the game and their guild expect out of them.

Guilds are there main source of socializing in this world. The best guilds are hard to get into because they have the best players with the best characters. Many good guilds are very strict on their members as far as when they have to be online for meetings and "raids". "Raids" usually refer to bosses on the game and takes large groups to overcome. People can get kicked out of guilds if they miss certain things or stay offline for too many long. Guilds allow players to share equipment and gold if they are needed. 27

Logan use to belong to the best guild in his realm. They had very strict premises for maintaining in the guild. They had to have a ninety-five percentage rating for all guild activities. They had certain times they were expected to be online to carry out raids. If you missed three of these you were immediately banned from the guild and were not allowed to rejoin. These restrictions vary from guild to guild depending on how serious the members are about the game.

Lucas has met many people through WOW which he considers friends. He says that it is common to meet people but most of the time you don't keep up for long periods of time because of real world issues. He said most of the time people he meets either get married or just generally lose interest in the game and eventually end up not playing

anymore. He has been playing consistently with a guy name Tony that he met on there about a year and a half ago. He says it is common for them to have conversations about general things but mostly about topics concerning the game.

He said it is fairly common for people who meet on WOW to visit each other especially if they are close to each other. His brother use to play the game as much as Lucas and met a girl on there who flew to Kentucky from California to visit him. It didn't work out between them in the long run but it was still a big step to take when you only knew a person through an online role playing game. This shows that some people who play WOW actually socialize on there in a significantly enough to actually affect their physical social situation.

Playing WOW does affect your physical world. When you play to the extent that Lucas does now you take a dramatic hit in your daily exercise. When you spend all your time in bed or in front of the computer there is not many calories burned. Though playing games like this do improve some skills such as typing and critical thinking as far as strategy does. He referred to it as chess at one point even though he doesn't know how to play chess.

When Logan quit playing this game so much there was a dramatic change in his social life. He began being out more often and doing activities with different people. He is now a social monster. He knows everyone around here and has mastered networking with Facebook and texts. He has become wilder than he was when he played the game as far as drinking and other recreational substances go. This is not surprising considering that when he started getting into those things is when he broke free from the WOW reality.

## Conclusion

Role playing games have always been attractive some people because of the opportunity to temporarily escape their own. WOW has created a role playing game that does not only temporarily take you from your reality but essentially becomes your reality. The concerns of your character in that world become your main concerns. People who play at this level and invest this much time are not concerned with many other things other than eating and sleeping. Commonly both of those things become dictated by when the game allows you to accomplish them.

This was a difficult topic to cover because observations did not produce a lot of details other than watching them sitting in front of the computer. It is amazing how a game can attract someone to the extent that reality because a secondary concern to it. I was honestly surprised I finally got him out long enough to get an interview with him. It is not my place to make a judgment about this lifestyle choice but I imagine that it is something that will pass in time. As of right now though people who play WOW to that extent belong more to that world than they do to ours.

## Notes

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## Fieldwork Observations

## Observations

-when I arrive at my buddies house he is already in the midst of game play

-he is drinking a mountain dew and says he has been playing since 2pm and I he woke up and around one thirty

-he seems to be playing with multiple people

-I count sixteen buttons on his computer mouse and he seems to be using most them

-he is also using a lot of the keys on the key board

-there are about eight separate boxes open on his screen overlapping the game play

-he keeps talking into a mic to the people in his group but I really don't understand much of what he is saying

-after about an hour he gets up to use the bathroom but isn't away very long

-he gets pretty intense and cusses other people in his group alot

## Response

-I kind of expected this when I was on my way out to his house

-I was really not very surprised at this

-I assume that he has played with most of these people.

-this seemed a little bit like overkill at first but as I watched he used most of them including several on keyboard

-confused about why there is a need for so many different boxes

-he uses some slang in regular sentences but I still can't make sense of much of it.

-at this point I realize that observation is probably going to be useless because all im really doing is watching him stare at a computer and hit buttons

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Interview Index

Flk 399

Informant: Lucas Groce

00:00-05:00

Discusses what World of Warcraft is generally. He briefly mentions some of the characters featured in the game. Mentions playing with local players he knows and how playing in a group works. Also how there is no specific course of game play.

05:00-10:00

Briefly speaks of the role of a particular character in the game. How a character obtains money and other resources needed in the game. Mentions skills a character can obtain and how the world is generally dominated by male players. What the main goal of the game is.

10:00-15:00

He continues to speak of your main objective in the game. Also talks about what groups of players are called and good ways to level your character up. He mentions different classes of characters and their responsibilities in a battle. Also how people with the same type character can differentiate themselves from each other.

15:00-20:00

He talks about how the older Warcraft games differ from World of Warcraft. He talks about the attitude of the general online community and how you go about finding people to join your group for larger battles. Also mentions an alternative mode of game play call PVP.

20:00-25:00

He explains what the term “Hot keying” means an also a piece of hardware he bought especially for the game. He explains that the online community is so large that it needs many servers. He talks about choosing a server and how they differ in community and other aspects.

25:00-30:00

He explains the maximum amount of people a single server can sustain and how that server becomes your community. He explains why he picked this particular server and hassle that comes if you want to switch to another. He speaks about casually meeting other players in the game. Also how social the players can be sometimes.

30:00-35:00

Explains why it can be important to repeat some battles you complete. Also how some people he has met through World of Warcraft he considers friends and why. He speaks about how common it is for people who meet on the game to actually get together outside the game. Also methods of communication while playing the game.

35:00-40:00

He explains why people use other means to communicate during games instead of the option the game gives. He also talks about certain situations where audio communication is vital during game play. He speaks about different versions of PVP

mode and how they differ.

40:00-45:00

He goes into detail about some common terms in the game and what they actually mean. Also how most people who play the PVP mode on the game often have a high leveled character. He speaks about what “quests” are and the benefits and progression of the game it provides.

45:00-50:00

He talks about some common uses of text and an incident that became a massively popular talking point on the game. Also talks about methods gamers use to make themselves more appealing to groups online that they want to join. He mentions the constant expansion packs for the game that have been released since he started playing.

50:00-55:00

He talks about what the expansion packs actually change about the game. He also speaks about how the company Blizzard who makes the game tries to make the game as fair as possible as for as abilities of the characters go. He mentions why he originally started playing the game and how much time he spent when he started. He talks about someone he plays with on there a lot that he met over a year ago and why it is difficult to keep connections with people on the game.

55:00-60:00

He talks about how much he currently plays and why he continues to play the game. Also how conversation about World of Warcraft usually takes precedence over other discussions even when not playing. He compares characters and says that this is the

most common talk outside of the game. Also how distance between players in actual geography can affect game play.

01:00:00-01:02:26

He explains why he has enjoyed the game so much and why he feels invested in it. He also talks about how much overall time he has put into a certain character on the game. He mentions that there is a market for characters that are fully developed depending on the specifics and equipment of their character.

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Interview Index

Flk 399

Informant: Logan Conover

00:00-05:00

He begins to talk about when he first started playing and how frequent he played. He explains the general lore and story of the game from when it was released until today. Logan says goes in to why he doesn't play so much anymore but why he still keeps up with the game. He talks about the features of expansion packs and family he use to play with.

05:00-10:00

He speaks about the differences in game play and overall options in the game now compared to when he played. Speaks about the three different main types of players and how each role they play is essential to playing the game. He explains why people often play with people they know or are familiar with.

10:00-15:00

He talks about original role playing games before the introduction of the computer and the similarities and differences between them. He speaks about why he originally started playing and why he holds value in his character and playing of the game. Speaks about some games common to World of Warcraft and how his brother influenced him in

fantasy and role playing games.

15:00-20:00

He continues to compare World of Warcraft to other games that are similar to it and why he believes it is superior to them. He talks about his favorite class of character and why in his mind it is the best one to have. He speaks about how each character can learn professions which gives them advantages over others. Also discusses some common and easiest ways to make money in the game.

20:00-25:00

Speaks about playing with friends in high school and some of the things they did for fun. He talks about the ratio of men to women who play the game and the reason it's sometimes difficult to tell the sex of people you are playing with. He discusses communication methods use in the game and how the knowledge of the online community was more familiar when the game was first released compared to now. Also goes into some detail about common terms and abbreviations used in the game.

25:00-30:00

Speaks about different aspects of game play and when they first introduced the PVP option into the game. He discusses how most players never follow the same route throughout the game and how after playing a character for a while you figured out faster ways to accomplish tasks. He talks about how the story of the game keeps up with the lore of its predecessors and how there are online books that go into great detail of the story.

30:00-35:00

He discusses how the game keeps up with statistics in almost everything you do in

the game. He talks about how long it takes to level your character up and times people within a group generally socialize. He discusses how much time he has logged into his character and how he belonged to one of the top groups in the game when he played more often. He talks about what groups are called and how they are identified in the game.

35:00-40:00

He speaks briefly about an unusual eating habit that was a result of playing the game so much. He talks about how serious groups online are taken and how they use to have a lot stricter requirements to gain access into them. He also speaks about some of the best groups in the world and how some modes of game play are more popular in different countries. Also he talks about how some people who are extremely good can make money by gaining sponsorship.

40:00-45:00

He talks about how some slang and a form of hazing that goes on for people who first start playing the game. Speaks about how some friends with higher level characters can help lower level characters level up quicker. He talks about how a friend of his who use to play a lot spent some time hacking into peoples account and selling them online. Also how accounts being hacked and sold is common on the game and how paypal.com has had to take steps to avoid responsibility.

45:00-49:55

He continues talking about his friend who also outsourced the job of leveling characters up and made money off of it. Talks about how some people can level characters up and sale them fast enough to make enough money to support themselves. He speaks how some people look at World of Warcraft not only as a game but also as a

job. He ends the interview by talking about why he plays the game and why it is significant to him.



My friend's guild



One of friends playing World of Warcraft with duel-screen setup



Character selection and setup screen



One of my friends doing a quest on WOW



Lucas's mouse he uses for playing WOW



Screenshot of an actual "raid" in action



Picture of Lucas playing WOW together with a buddy