The Virtual World: A Comparison of Virtual and Consumer Culture

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In the last 30 years video games have become a form of entertainment that have begun to rival and surpass other forms of electronic media (such as movies, television, etc.). The important difference between video games and other electronic media is that video games are an active media where the player participates and interacts within the device’s virtual environment. However, in the Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) video game World of Warcraft (WOW), players no longer simply interact with a virtual environment; they are interacting in a virtual community with thousands of other players. Through virtual rewards and the systemic setup of these communities, a distinct virtual culture has emerged, with seasoned players becoming enculturated in a unique set of values, beliefs, and ways of interacting. This article will compare aspects of WOW’s virtual culture, ranging from the results of systematic design to the functionality and social role of small groups of players, to “objective” consumer culture. Subsequently, it will also describe and document different practices and perceptions unique to gamer culture, while also explaining how consumerist logic affects the formulation of different actions and norms.

Before jumping into the analysis it may be useful to give a brief description of the game itself, as well as of some concepts unique to the gamer culture. In WOW, the player becomes a fantasy-like avatar and roams about in a fantasy-like world, complete with elves, monsters, great treasures, and specific lore. Players initially obtain “experience points” that allow them to gain levels and thus become stronger. “Leveling up” brings with it increased player attributes and different, as well as more powerful, “character skills,” which are abilities usually suited for destroying other units or maintaining the “life” of one’s own unit (or other friendly units). Leveling is done by destroying other units, or non-player characters (NPCs) within the game, usually along the framework of specific quests in which you complete detailed objectives. Different “zones” have different difficulties and players must achieve a certain level of strength, or simply “level,” if they wish to survive in different zones. “Items” are acquired through various means, mainly quests, and consist of apparel and weapons you “equip” on your character to gain different attributes in order to increase the strength of one’s character. However, WOW is an exceptionally social game, as it is exclusively played with hundreds or thousands of other players simultaneously. Given this, players may also acquire items of pure social value such as a “tabard,” which is a piece of clothing, clearly visible, displaying one’s allegiance to a particular and identifiable group of players. These groups of players are called “guilds” and are the cornerstone social unit within the World of Warcraft. For a more thorough description, see the Wikipedia page for WOW (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_of_Warcraft).
Cultural processes within WOW

In WOW, players are able to accumulate a “capital” of sorts by acquiring items within the game. This feat has been said to “challenge traditional capitalistic notions of ‘productivity’ versus ‘leisure’,” (Pearce 2006:19). Is it possible for the players of this electronic form of entertainment to be gaining culturally valuable objects? Celia Pearce (2006) notes that forms of play can be productive; specifically, players engage (at a minimum) in the cultural production of a form of folk art. This type of folk art ranges from the virtual existence of their avatar, to videos and discussion groups which depict and discuss aspects of the virtual culture.

It is clear that the virtual rewards of WOW have become central if not the focal point of the game itself. In WOW, slang words for enemy units are based on the items the creatures produce once killed; for instance, the enemies that produce lower quality items are labeled as “trash mobs”. The emphasis on item/currency acquisition is further demonstrated by Ducheneaut and colleagues (2006) who note that the major trading posts of each faction (Orgrimmar and Ironforge) are the most populated zones within the game. The economic aspect of the game is a critical segment of the virtual culture, and for some it dominates their time. There are players that spend all (or most) of their “in-game” time acquiring currency by collecting items and money obtained by killing enemies (Ducheneaut, et al. 2006). These players are known as farmers because they spend their time “farming” items.

The distinction between the virtual WOW world and its material counterpart is blurred because both Western consumer culture and WOW culture are based on the acquisition of rewards. What is interesting here is that there is a convergence between the virtual rewards of WOW and the material rewards of consumerism. As Humphreys notes, the link is established by the farmers, who “play instrumentally – to make money by trading game items for real world money – and make no investment affectively in either the game or the character that they are playing.” (Humphreys 2008:164). Therefore, in conjunction with the similarity of rewards in both the real and virtual worlds, virtual rewards from WOW actually have a monetary value in the consumer culture and are sold online for “real world” currency.

According to the rules and terms of use within the game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2007), acts of selling in-game content are forbidden. WOW’s developer – Blizzard Entertainment - attempts to enforce no-tolerance policies that result in accounts being terminated. Despite these consequences, there are an exceptional amount of players to monitor, and the policies cannot be enforced by employees alone. Blizzard tries to encourage players to help regulate this problem in order to protect the in-game economy which is being disrupted. The ironic aspect of this is that “there is not a culture of high player-to-player surveillance [and] the encouragement to report to customer services is not backed with structural rewards,” (Humphreys 2008:160). No rewards are offered for engaging in this type
of activity and as one would expect, based on the virtual culture that emphasizes virtual rewards, few to none participate in it.

It may be thought that the activities themselves promote or facilitate item acquisition; in other words, the in-game activities are done for the value of carrying out the activities and not strictly to acquire items. However, activities become popular within the virtual culture based on the rewards they offer (Brignall and Valey 2008; Humphreys 2008; Krzywinska 2006; Williams, et al. 2006). This was seen explicitly when Blizzard implemented a reward system for in-game actions that were previously non-profitable. After being applied to the game, many players began spending larger proportions of the in-game time competing for these rewards (Brignall and Valey 2008). Prior to the implementation of this system, player-versus-player combat was not directly pursued to a large extent; once they attached a system of rewards it became, arguably, the most practiced aspect of the game.

It could be argued that the rewards classified as profitable currency are intended for characters that have already attained the maximum level. “Leveling up,” or the gaining of levels, is a type of virtual reward as well because it allows the character to obtain upgrades. As Ducheneault and colleagues (2006) note, it takes players more time on average to reach an odd character level as opposed to an even level because Even levels come with upgrades to a character’s skill set. The attractiveness of WOW could have a lot to do with its “fine-tuned incentives and reward structure,” (Ducheneault, et al. 2006:314). Therefore, the systematic design of the virtual rewards system in WOW is the main reason for the culture’s popularity.

The shocking and paradoxically logical nature of this virtual culture, bent on the acquisition of virtual rewards, is that the very “world” in which it operates (the computer game) is itself a capitalist-owned piece of intellectual property (Humphreys 2008). As Sal Humphreys remarks, “the circulation of cultural meanings and the building of, and access to, cultural capital increasingly occurs through participation within these propertied spaces,” (Humphreys 2008:150). Thus, similar to Western consumer culture, this new virtual culture within WOW is pitched to increase profits for the companies that own them. It is therefore not surprising “that play time within these MMO games is greatly influenced by the game’s [designed] reward structure,” (Ducheneault, et al. 2006:293).

WOW’s virtual culture - as influenced by the game designers and producers - is geared towards keeping players playing the game for the longest possible amount of time. This implication evokes a functionalist perspective because it would suggest that specific aspects of WOW virtual culture have a function to play. In this sense, the cultural symbols serve a dual function in WOW. They are functional in that they attempt to keep the consumer/player happy, which then translates into profits for the developer. This is why the social element of the game, reinforced through the rewards structure, attempts to “[extend the] play and loyalty that result from players having strong ties
with the game [because this] is translated directly into monetary value,” (Humphreys 2008:154). As previously mentioned, this mirrors aspects of consumer culture where cultural artifacts or symbols are produced in such a way by capitalists in order to maximize profits.

These premises are part of the forces resulting in a major shift in cultural perception that contends how play can be productive (Pearce 2006). The above points display how WOW’s specific culture of play is framed in a production based perspective, not simply making play productive (e.g. through obtaining virtual rewards) but also through transforming productive effort into entertainment. They also illustrate how the boundaries between production and play, specifically virtual and material cultures, are blurring. From the capitalist-designed WOW we also find a variety of cultural practices influenced by the developer and its motivation of profit. Nevertheless, individual agency cannot be overlooked as “veteran players have imported [into WOW] many cultural practices that originated in […] earlier environments,” (Ducheneault, et al. 2006:316). These “earlier environments” are other contexts in which the gamer culture exists and develops with, namely other videogames. Although the structure and processes are largely shaped by the developer, the individual players are still left free to interpret these structures and attribute them with their own symbolic significance. Although this demonstrates how players practice agency, the context of games – i.e. the overarching structures in which the players operate – in which these cultural practices are formulated is key to their unique character. A cultural practice is more likely to be universal in the gamer world if its applicability spans multiple games, such as the label branded to those unfamiliar with a particular game, the “newbs.”

**Cultural subunits**

Now that we have investigated the larger cultural processes and systems that operate within WOW, it is time to look closer at the smaller cultural units, the guilds. Guilds are groups of players that operate under a specific symbol - displayed on their guild tabard – and usually operate as a team to assist the individual players in obtaining better items. However, they may also serve a strictly social function. Smaller guilds (1-10 players) tend to focus more on social bonds as opposed to larger guilds (150-450 players) that focus more on the goals of the game (Humphreys 2008; Williams, et al. 2006). What is notable here is that this pattern is “not unique to virtual space and appears to follow the same patterns found in offline social groups,” (Williams, et al. 2006:346). As with “real world” groups, the larger guilds require formal political and practical organization in order to help them operate and pursue structural goals.

In concert with previous aspects of the game, guilds serve an instrumental purpose for the game designers and developers. Guilds function to increase the profits of the developer because “characters in a guild [are] significantly less likely to abandon a character than characters not in a guild,” (Ducheneault, et al. 2006:292). Although this does not necessarily mean that a player will disconnect the account and thus
stop paying Blizzard, an abandoned character means there is less investment connecting a player to WOW. This function can be seen in endgame/high-level guilds because the rate of character abandonment also decreases with increasing level (Ducheneault, et al. 2006). Endgame guilds are those in which many players have reached the maximum level and thus the guild’s function is mainly geared towards item acquisition. Although social in nature, the instrumental value of guilds is shared by the high level players who, through “interactions with their fellow gamers […] share a range of practical benefit[s] for accomplishing game goals. The other players [within guilds] are clearly a means to an end,” (Williams, et al. 2006:351). This demonstrates that the more a player is fully engaged in the WOW culture with regard to the virtual rewards, the longer they remain active within both the guild and the culture itself. Therefore, a well-producing but unfulfilling job in reality might be endured for the same reason a well-producing endgame guild would be. In essence, similar to real-world work, a person must make choices linked to being involved with particular guilds based on its in-game item return, but also on the social experience of the other players in the guild. A guild high in both social experience and in-game returns would be highly valued, but one might endure a socially unfulfilling guild if the in-game returns are deemed worth the trouble.

Becoming involved with a guild, similar to becoming involved with any “real life” social group, requires that a prospective member undertake a long process of enculturation (Thomas and Brown 2007). Consequently, most “successful [guilds] are composed of people who share similar dispositions about the game and gameplay,” (Thomas and Brown 2007:161). Groups of similar characters result in similarly interpreted, shared experiences; their shared history may eventually be passed on to new members, thereby reproducing the institutional knowledge of the guild itself. Guilds are reproduced in the same way as cultures and institutions in material reality.

Brignall and Valey see guilds as practicing a form of neo-tribalism, in which “groups and subgroups within the existing social order […] decide to divide and form even smaller subgroups or tribes because of the desire to be among others with analogous characteristics,” (Brignall and Valey 2008:3). These groups are said to prioritize their own interests to the neglect of all others. Players within them tend to select complimentary professions (economic skills) in order to benefit the common interests of the group, allowing them to acquire items for intra-guild players more effectively and efficiently. These groups are said to shed real world and larger group behaviors, and establish new codes of social conduct to facilitate the needs of the guild. When “hardcore players” (online thirty-five hours or more a week) were interviewed within a sample of guilds, 25 of 34 “reported they preferred socializing in WOW to offline socializing,” (Brignall and Valey 2008:5). Spending a large portion of your time interacting and communicating with people inside the framework of WOW and usually discussing aspects of WOW, may make talking face-to-face with a person
about real-world issues stressful and
difficult. After the enculturation into these
groups and spending an extending period
within them - required to be considered a
hardcore player - it is not surprising that
players prefer interacting in them and
experience culture shock when socializing in
material reality. This is an anecdotal claim
(based on experience), however, deviating
from familiarity is prospectively troubling
and distressing for those straying from their
norm.

Conclusion

The aspects of virtual culture
observed in the massive multiplayer online
video game WOW have been shown to have
an interesting relationship to the material
culture of the capitalist world. Although the
virtual culture of WOW is designed to be a
form of entertainment, it has a pronounced
resemblance to the productive nature of a
capitalist society. This not only calls into
question the distinction between the virtual
and material cultures, but also the
boundaries between play and production.
Groups or guilds within WOW share many
features of their material counterparts,
especially when the relationship between
size and functionality is concerned. The
resulting question is thus not whether a
distinction should be drawn between the
virtual and material worlds, but how this can
be accomplished given that the virtual world
of WOW is a prototypical emulation of
material reality. A more important question
is whether we should be surprised that this
virtual world shares so many traits with
western capitalist society being that it was
created similarly in the name of profits.

“Workaholic” is a concept understood by
many people in diverse settings, and
especially in WOW, but if one’s play
becomes work, and a seemingly simulated
context becomes reality, where do we stand
in terms of labeling the hardcore/devoted
gamer? Are they a cultural outsider in a
world historically based in the “real world”
or are they an insider in a world not yet
understood as a stand-alone legitimate
culture?

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