

Corporate Ideology in *World of Warcraft*

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Hours have gone to blade: days, weeks of my life. To be precise, in the past year I have spent eighteen days, two hours, and seventeen minutes in Azeroth¹. And my level fifty-seven hunter, Ulcharmin, is one of lesser lights in our guild, the Truants, an active group of academics, a full contingent of Ph.D.s and advanced graduate students who dedicate a significant portion of their lives to the study of MMORPGs. By my estimation, about 5% of my total life during the past year has gone into the *World of Warcraft*, perhaps 7.5% of my waking life. While I'm no more addicted to *Warcraft* than I am to scotch, chocolate, or sex, I've spent more time killing trolls over the past year than I have drinking alcohol, eating candy, or making love (combined). During this same year, I watched the first two seasons of the narrative-rich, multi-sequential TV series *Lost* on DVD, forty-eight episodes, all in a row. That took about thirty-five hours total, about 8% of the amount of time I spent playing *World of Warcraft*. During the course of my life, I've read James Joyce's *Ulysses* three times, twice carefully. I estimate that took about six days of twenty-four-hour time, about eighteen full eight-hour working days, about 33% of the time I've spent playing *World of Warcraft*. Is the world that the team of developers at Blizzard have created twelve times more compelling than the island of *Lost*? Am I three times more engaged, illuminated, and challenged by the

¹ I was disappointed to learn that the average player reaches level 60 after 15.5 days of play (Ducheneaut). Perhaps, as an herbalist, I've spent too much time stopping to smell the flowers.

topography and multifarious virtual life forms of Kalmidor and the Eastern Kingdom than I was by the topology and folk of Joyce's Dublin? I don't think so. What then, could compel me, a grown man of thirty-six years with a fully developed personality and real-world responsibilities, to spend so much time engaged in this alternate universe, riding a timber wolf, with my faithful pet Houndcat padding along beside me? Why would "hardcore" gamers spend considerably more time than I do, perhaps eighty days of real time per year, shunning the world of the flesh for a virtual fantasy world?

Playing *World of Warcraft*, sometimes referred to by its eight million (and likely more by the time you read this) players as "World of Warcrack" is indeed a compelling experience. I will argue here that though the world that Blizzard has created offers an engaging gameplay experience, and is not without some visual beauty, wit, and narrative subtlety², that the principle reason why Blizzard has been able to build such a large and devoted audience for their flagship product is in fact because it offers a convincing and detailed simulacrum of a process of "becoming a success" in a capitalist societies. *World of Warcraft* is both a game and a simulation that reifies the values of Western market-driven economies. The game offers its players a capitalist fairytale, in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through the ranks of society and acquire great wealth. Moreover, beyond simply representing capitalism as good, *World of Warcraft* serves as a tool to educate its players in a range of behaviors and skills specific to the situation of conducting

² The majority of quest narratives are simply window-dressing around tasks that could be simply restated as "go kill twenty crocodiles." I do however appreciate the wit of the many intertextual allusions in the game to works of literature, movies, and other videogames. The bankers in Undercity, for instance, are Montagues, while the white-bearded great hunter searching for the lost pages of his book in Stranglethorn is named Hemet Nesingwary. The apes in Un'Goro sometimes drop empty barrels that, while virtually worthless, are an amusing reference to the classic arcade game Donkey Kong.

business in an economy controlled by corporations. While it's certainly true that some students are failing out of college, some marriages are falling apart, and some bodies are slipping into flabby obesity as a direct result of *World of Warcraft* addiction³, in a larger sense, the game is training a generation of good corporate citizens not only to consume well and to pay their dues, but also to climb the corporate ladder, to lead projects, to achieve sales goals, to earn and save, to work hard for better possessions, to play the markets, to win respect from their peers and their customers, to direct and encourage and cajole their underlings to outperform, to become better employees and perhaps, eventually, effective future CEOs. Playing *World of Warcraft* serves as a form of corporate training.

The form and structure of players' engagement with videogames have always been to a large part determined by the economic goals of game developers for completely logical reasons. Videogames are primarily entertainment products, not forms of art. Each type of videogame and computer game is developed with an idea in mind of how to most effectively extract money from its players and provide a reliable income stream for its producers.

From an economic perspective, the purpose of classic arcade games such as *Pac-Man*, *Centipede*, *Asteroids*, and *Galaga* was to extract as many quarters from as many players as

³ I'm nearly certain that the term "addiction" will be unpopular with my fellow players, because the popular media have used the term while terrifying us with stories of teenage *World of Warcraft* players (these stories are typically set in China, and like horror movies, the victims are always teens) literally *dying* because they *forgot to eat* while playing a MMORPG. While I'm sure that at least *one* of these stories is true, I doubt it's a widespread phenomenon. Your child can and likely will survive *World of Warcraft*. Intelligent adults can spend hours a day play MMORPGs without becoming pale-faced, sunken-eyed, self-destructive shadows of their former selves. While playing *World of Warcraft* has the hallmarks of a psychological addiction, it may in fact also be a kind of cure. Like MOOs, MUDs and many other types of online activities, *World of Warcraft* is a social activity, a cure for the deadly human disease of loneliness. Nonetheless, we can crave human contact in a particular type of structured way just as much as we can crave a cigarette.

possible as quickly as possible, while still providing an experience compelling enough that the player⁴ would rather *wait in line* to play the game of his choice than play something else instead. The value proposition of those early arcade games had much in common with that of horror movies. The idea was to deliver the player a quick dose of adrenaline, as each level became quickly and progressively more difficult, with more aliens, more spaceships, more missiles coming at the player faster, faster, *faster*, until he died and was prompted to feed the machine another quarter.

In contrast, the developers of console-based and computer games faced a different challenge. Console game developers wanted to first convince the player, with his or her limited budget, that their particular cartridge, and not one produced by the competition, was among the few that the player absolutely *needed* to own. The producers were charging a non-trivial per-unit price for the cartridges,⁵ so the notion of replay value became more important. The idea was to hook the player, both on a particular console system and on a particular *brand* of game. Games then were structured to offer compelling experiences that could either be replayed until the *new version* of the game came out (e.g. the *Madden NFL* football games) or to offer game experiences that could be played through and mastered just in time for the release of the next game in the series (e.g. Tom Clancy's fill in the blank military escapade). The amount of playing time the player was expected to spend with each game title increased dramatically, though the developers would never want to produce a game so

⁴ Say, in my case circa 1982, a sweaty, parched twelve-year old kid who has just ridden his ten-speed two miles through traffic to Tin Pan Alley, and decides to forego a cold Coca-Cola, so that he'll have two more quarters to feed to Galaga.

⁵ \$10-\$15 per Atari cartridge in 1987 (atariage.com), \$30-\$50 for Nintendo 64 cartridges in the 1990s, about \$30-\$60 for contemporary PS2 games.

compelling that the player would not want to buy another game from them. That would be a stupid business practice.

The business model of the massively multiplayer online game is significantly different from those that preceded it. Though there is a significant up-front cost for the client software⁶, the real money is made in the monthly churn. Depending upon the plan they choose, *World of Warcraft* players pay between \$12.99-\$14.99 per month (as of March 2007). While players are likely to spend money on other types of games and other entertainments,⁷ a low percentage of these players are likely to pay the churn on more than one MMORPG at a time. The logical goal of MMORPG producers, then, is to immerse players in one single game for as long as possible, without diversion to other virtual world environments, and without end. The fewer new games that a particular company has to develop the lower their development costs will be, and thus the higher their profits. From an economic perspective, it is in the interests of an MMORPG's producers that their game be as addictive as cigarettes⁸. Game developers don't want you to go and find another dealer. They

⁶ \$39.99 for *World of Warcraft*, another \$39.99 for the *Burning Crusade* expansion.

⁷ Even the most dedicated gamers tend to leave the cave a couple times a year to catch the latest Hollywood blockbuster.

⁸ This is neither to say that MMORPGs are as destructive to your health as cigarettes, nor that Blizzard or other game developers want the players to play the games to the point of neglecting other aspects of their lives (job, family, etc.) In fact, both from public relations and business model points of view, it makes sense for developers to want their players to be healthy, productive members of society who can continue to pay their subscription fees until a ripe old age. *World of Warcraft* even has built-in incentives for players to stay away from the game. Players need to rest their characters in order to gain full experience points for the monsters they kill. It's also more efficient from a business point of view (server maintenance and bandwidth costs) if players only utilize the servers for a limited period of time, and not during every moment of their waking lives. MMORPG developers are seeking a happy medium—one in which players would prefer the game to other entertainment diversions, and would happily pay for the privilege of playing for years on end, whilst simultaneously exemplifying a healthy, mainstream lifestyle.

want you to develop a taste for their brand and keep buying the same product, from the same company, over and over again. The subscription model has made videogames into a kind of utility, a fixed cost that becomes for the gamer just another fact of life.

As the economic models of games have changed, so to have the nature of the reward systems used to motivate players to continue playing. In his essay “Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games” in *First Person*, Eric Zimmerman defines “game” as “a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome” (2004, 160). The quantifiable outcome was certainly less complex in early video games than it is in contemporary massively multiplayer online games. In *Pong*, the first of two players to reach a predetermined score wins. In games such as *Centipede* or *Galaga*, arcade players struggled to achieve seemingly absurd high scores (for example 567,841). Each monster, insect, space ship, ghost, etc. shot had its own point value. Arcade players were motivated both by progressing through levels and by achieving a localized, ephemeral kind of preteen immortality by having their initials enshrined on the “All Time High Score” screen of a given game. While these scores were tied to specific events in the course of play, in a larger sense, they were mere abstractions, with little to no metaphoric relationship to reality. To be a high scoring player of a given game simply meant that you had achieved a level of mastery over a particular entertainment device.

In *World of Warcraft*, the quantifiable aspect of a player’s achievement is not marked with a single number that serves as a proxy for a player’s achievement, but by many different types of metrics. The avatar has an overall level between one and seventy. Attributes such as strength, intelligence, agility, spirit, and stamina define the player’s avatar quantitatively.

The basis of these metrics are determined to some extent by the character's race and class (e.g. orc hunter) and to a greater extent by the level that the player has achieved. The particular weapons, armor, and other items that the player has looted from slain enemies, been awarded for accomplishing quests, given as gifts from other players, and purchased in the auction house also affect those basic attributes, which in turn affect the player's armor, melee attack, and ranged attack abilities. Additionally, the player has a quantifiable reputation with different factions and militaristic ranks of "honor." To further complicate matters, a player's performance is also measured informally by his or her fellow players, particularly fellow guild members. In addition to the "hard" metrics calculated by the system, there are numerous "soft" outcomes in terms of the effects a player's given actions will have on his or her relationships with other players. The types of ways players evaluate other players might range from their ability to effectively perform a given task during a raid, to their generosity, their dedication, their abilities as a conversational partner, or their adherence to complex systems of social mores and etiquette, including those of the *World of Warcraft* as a whole, those of a particular server⁹, and those that are specific to a given guild. While to players of *World of Warcraft*, this likely does not seem complex, as players have internalized the majority of this system during the course of many hours spent playing the game, to people unfamiliar with MMORPGS, I suspect that this sounds like a very tangled web indeed. The player's actions have multiple and complex effects, not on a single score, but on multiple quantifiable and non-quantifiable attributes. In fact, it is probably safe to say that the state

⁹ Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler's essay in this volume discusses the conventions of role-playing servers versus non-role-playing servers.

and performance of an avatar in *World of Warcraft* is measured and analyzed¹⁰, in more ways, more often, and more closely, than most of us are in “real life” situations such as our working lives.

Part of the appeal of *World of Warcraft* is that while all players are accessing a shared universe of possible activities, choosing from the same pool of available quests, all of these metrics and choices allow for a very high degree of personalization. From the first moment the player “rolls” a character and gives it a name she is defining a distinctive avatar, a character that will be distinct from all of the other characters in the game. The player defines a second self, with traits and physical qualities far different from his or her own “real” embodied personality. For many players this represents an opportunity to escape from the confines of their own situation (their Heideggerian “thrownness”) in the world. While we all find ourselves living lives that we have in part determined by our choices and in part been thrown into by virtue of being born into them, in *World of Warcraft* and in other MMORPGs, we have the opportunity to wipe the slate clean, to start again and to choose new lives in a new world. As Castranova notes in *Synthetic Worlds*, “We are no longer stuck with the Game of Life as we receive it from our ancestors. We can make a new one, almost however we like” (2005, 70). While the nature of this virtual existence is constrained by the limits and affordances of a strictly defined virtual world within a particular software platform¹¹, it is still a world in which, for instance, an orphan orc can rise through the ranks from killing pigs for

¹⁰ T.L. Taylor’s essay in this volume discusses ways that players measure and analyze each other’s performance in greater detail.

¹¹ For instance, while I can perform a pre-programmed dance in *World of Warcraft*, I can’t develop a thriving career as a world-class ballerina.

a camp chef to being the CEO of a guild, leading, conducting, and directing massive expeditions of forty other players to slay dragons.

Just as in the *Sims Online* and other contemporary massively multiplayer online games, the metrics of achievement in *World of Warcraft* have shifted from the abstraction of a numerical score to more complex social and economic metrics that are familiar from everyday life. Rather than asking how high a score you've achieved, today's games might ask questions like "How much money did you earn? Have you achieved the highest possible position within your profession? Are you well-liked and respected by your peers?" The game has become a simulacrum of the world, an imaginary real.

We can imagine nearly as many possible metrics of achievement¹² within virtual worlds as we can within the real world. Perhaps because *World of Warcraft* is a truly massive Massively Multiplayer Online Game, with more players than the populations of Norway and Rhode Island combined, in creating their imaginary reality, the developers at Blizzard have however defaulted to the values, ethos, and methodologies of the contemporary world's most popular ideology, market capitalism. While the acquisition of (virtual) material goods is only one of several metrics of achievement in *World of Warcraft*, and while the market is less explicitly *the point* of this game than it is in other popular MMORPGs and virtual worlds¹³, this world is nevertheless very clearly one in which gold rules. The spirit of capital in *World of Warcraft* is not simply reducible to more gold=greater achievement. Money is not a meaningless abstraction; gold is more often a means to an ends. It can be used to buy special

¹² One could imagine achieving the highest score for best dispute arbitration abilities, or best in-game storytelling abilities.

¹³ In *Second Life*, for instance, players buy and sell property and can develop in-game objects and retain the intellectual property rights to those objects. Players buy both property and in-game currency from Linden Labs, the game's developer.

weapons and armor, for instance, or to motivate or reward guild members. Once players have achieved the highest possible level, achievement is no longer marked by leveling up but by getting *better stuff*. Even honor, earned through battle, is ultimately rewarded in a materialist way—certain “epic” items are only available for purchase by players who achieved a particular rank.

Louis Althusser, in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” asserts that ideological state apparatuses contribute to the formation of our values and desires, our positions as subjects. As opposed to repressive state apparatuses, such as the military, prisons, and the police, that enforce ideology by controlling and disciplining the body through violence, ideological state apparatuses such as religion, educational institutions, mass media, and literature shape subject positions through ideology. They interpellate subjects, establishing and reifying certain rules of behavior to which the members of a given society should adhere. According to Althusser, ideology is not something a subject consciously chooses. While I think Althusser is mistaken both in his portrayal of ideological state apparatuses as monolithic entities and in the anti-humanism of conceiving individuals as pure subjects, with little or no free will, I think there is value to the idea that ideology suffuses all cultural institutions. Althusser that when children are in school, they learn not only practical “know-how,” but in a larger sense, “how to be”:

besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behavior, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is ‘destined’ for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to ‘speak proper French’, to ‘handle’ the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to ‘order them about’ properly, i.e. (ideally) to ‘speak to them’ in the right way, etc. (1994, 103)

In Althusser's formulation, even those aspects of culture we might think of as mere entertainments carry a great deal of ideological freight. There is more at stake in a game than simply winning or losing the game. In *World of Warcraft* and other contemporary massively multiplayer online games that are not narrowly defined types of contests but complex social systems, we need to consider the nature of both the "know-how" and the "how to be" that the game teaches us.

The process of advancing in *World of Warcraft* is itself to some extent modeled on the process of getting an education¹⁴. You begin at level one, with very few skills and only the unrefined abilities that you "were born with" by virtue of your race and class. During the course of the game, by working hard and completing quests, tasks assigned by higher-level NPCs, players progress to higher levels. While these quests comprise the main mode of "play" during the earlier parts of the game, they are also clearly a kind of work. While there are several different types of quests in the game, most of those designed for solo players involve a repetitive task of one kind or another, such as slaughtering twenty giant spiders or thirty owlbeasts. Keeping in mind Althusser's suggestion that one of the ideological functions of education was to teach future managers how to "speak proper French" so that they could order workers about more effectively, consider one of the first quests low-level orcs are asked

¹⁴ This is perhaps one reason why the academics of the Truants feel so at home in the game. Although the nature of the work one does along the way is quite different, the grind of progressing to level sixty isn't all that far removed from the academic grind of achieving bachelor's degree, master's degree, Ph.D., tenure-track assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor. While master's students are sometimes awarded a tie or a scarf from their home institution upon completing their degree, *World of Warcraft* players are awarded with the ability to ride a mount, such as a timber wolf, at level forty. Though virtual, let me assure you that in purely materialistic terms the mount is a more satisfying token reward for the accomplishment.

to complete in the beginner's area of Durotar, the "Valley of Trials." The quest is titled "Lazy Peons." The low-level orc encounters an NPC, Foreman Thazz'ril, who says:

Foreman Thazz'ril: Cursed peons! They work hard gathering lumber from the trees of the valley, but they're always taking naps! I need someone to help keep the peons in line.

You look like the right orc for my task. Here, you take this blackjack and use it on any lazy peons you find sleeping on the job. A good smack will get them right back to work! Return the blackjack when you're done.

Lousy slacking peons...

While the peons in question are cartoonish figures akin to Shrek, found emitting green ZZZZZs rather than engaged in work of any kind, it is nonetheless the case that one of the first acts of "play" during the player's *World of Warcraft* training is performing an act of violence on behalf of management, literally clubbing a worker over the skull with a blackjack to set him back to work. On the player's completion of the task, Foreman Thazz'ril expresses his gratitude:

Foreman Thazz'ril: Good, good. Maybe they'll think twice before slacking next time! Thanks for the help!

Though this is only one of many quests, most of which have little to do with labor relations, the implicit message to the *World of Warcraft* player is quite clear. The *World of Warcraft* is a world in which work is valued as an end in its own right. It is also a world in which *slacking* will bear little fruit. Though playing the game is itself a form of escapism from the demands of life in the real world, it is somewhat paradoxically a kind of escapism into a second professional life, a world of work¹⁵.

¹⁵ In his essay, "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play," Nick Yee notes that "It is ironic that computers were made to work for us, but video

There is a complex in-game economy in *World of Warcraft*. The work the player does in *World of Warcraft* quests, instances, and PvP battlegrounds has its rewards. Most enemies that a player kills will drop items and often in-game currency as well: copper, silver, and gold pieces. The player can use this currency to purchase necessities, such as food, drink, weapons, ammunition, potions, and armor from vendors. Money is also necessary for players to continue their educations. After completing every second level, players can learn new skills or spells from their class trainers¹⁶. Education is not subsidized in *World of Warcraft*. To learn these skills, players must both have leveled up, and have the gold to pay for the training. Typically, players will have earned enough by grinding up to the level that they can afford their training. In addition to killing enemies and animals that drop gold, players can sell other items that these creatures drop to vendors, or on the open market via the auction house. In addition, each player can choose two primary professions and three secondary skills, such as fishing, cooking, and first aid. The practice of each of these professions and skills can result in the production of marketable commodities. Thus, in addition to their primary duties of slaughtering enemies for the glory of the Alliance or the Horde, *World of Warcraft* avatars earn their keep picking herbs, skinning dead animals, mining thorium,

games have come to demand that we work for them” (2006, 70).

¹⁶ Each skill learned adds another layer of complexity to gameplay, as it gives the player another action to choose during a combat situation. At level fifty-seven, there are about forty different actions I can initiate. In addition, my hunter carries about forty different objects (potions, food and drink, herbs, bandages, etc.) each of which has a purpose. While the actual manual dexterity of the player is of little importance in comparison to arcade-style joystick-and-button games, the array of choices available to the player at any given time is several orders of magnitude greater in current MMORPGs. My hunter, for instance, can fire a weapon in twelve different ways, each with particular effects. Gameplay in MMORPGs is less about how deftly the player moves, and more about how quickly and how well he or she makes strategic choices from available options.

crafting weapons, sewing clothes, and so on. Some players are known to log in to spend hours doing nothing but fishing¹⁷.

The phrase “time is money” takes on a new meaning in *World of Warcraft*. While players pay real money to subscribe to *World of Warcraft* for a set period of time measured in days or hours, within the game they acquire virtual objects, gold, and reputation by expending their time, whether by repeatedly grinding the same mobs over and over again, picking herbs, mining precious metals, or tailoring garments. Indeed, as Torill Elvira Mortensen notes in this volume, there is a small industry of actual *World of Warcraft* sweatshops, where “Chinese gold farmers” toil away at these repetitive activities in exchange for the real world currency of some western players who can’t be bothered to earn the virtual gold for themselves. There are some odd versions of real-world economic behaviors in the game. While no one I know¹⁸ would be motivated to work for more than a day or two by the prospect of purchasing a new pair of trousers, *World of Warcraft* players will happily put in dozens of hours of labor in order to acquire a particular pair of magic pants.

Currency becomes particularly important to players as they attain level forty. In their survey of *World of Warcraft* player behaviors, Ducheneaut et al. note that the amount of time players spend playing the game spikes in the few levels around level forty, when players are allowed to purchase a mount and need to acquire the necessary currency to do so (2006, 3). Players who have simply soloed and grouped their way through quests up to this point will

¹⁷ Though it’s interesting to note that the player in our guild known to spend the most time fishing says that she does so not for monetary reward in the game, but because she finds it meditative and relaxing after a hard day of work, much like recreational fishing in the real world.

¹⁸ That is no one in an economically advanced “first-world” nation.

likely find themselves short of the hundred or so gold pieces required to train in riding and to purchase their mount.

It is worth considering how the mount functions within the game, and why the purchase of a mount (and at higher levels, an *epic* mount) is so important to players. Mounts are riding animals that function as a form of ground transportation within the game. The most important reason for a player to acquire a mount is the pragmatic one that most directly affects gameplay: mounts increase the player's movement speed. As the player proceeds through the game, quests increasingly require the player to travel greater and greater distances. While the developers of *World of Warcraft* put a great deal of effort into creating beautifully rendered landscapes that can be wondrous to behold, most *World of Warcraft* players will attest that the "travel time" feature of the game, which perhaps serves to enhance the player's perception of the realism of the game world¹⁹, is also one of the most pain-inducing aspects of the game. There is a great deal of traveling to and fro in this world, and once the player is past the initial landscape-appreciation stage, most of this travel is about as exciting as traveling from Des Moines, Iowa to Lincoln, Nebraska in the back seat of your parents' station wagon. While getting a mount does not eliminate the need to travel within the game, it does cut some of this dead time. Owning a mount is also a mark of achievement.

World of Warcraft's site²⁰ attests that "Owning a mount is an impressive accomplishment in

¹⁹ A great deal of time spent playing *World of Warcraft* is time spent waiting, either to get to a destination, or for some form of transport, or for group members to show up. Rather than giving its players non-stop action, *World of Warcraft* encourages us to "hurry up and wait." There's an argument to be made that this ongoing deferral of gratification makes actual battles and encounters in the game more exciting, by forcing the player to anticipate them in advance of the experience. Jill Walker's essay in this volume discusses deferral as a narrative strategy in the game.

²⁰ <http://www.blizzard.co.uk/wow/townhall/mounts.shtml>

the game (not to mention the fact that it makes you look cool).” Just as is the case with other objects in the game, the possession of a mount is a status symbol. All the other players within the game know that a player who has achieved level forty is allowed to purchase a mount. One can assume that those players who ascend levels after forty without purchasing a mount lack a mount because they have failed to marshal their resources effectively. Thus, while the mount is not essential to gameplay, higher-level players seen strolling around the plains of Kalmidor without a mount are in a sense marked as failures, as unskilled players of the game. With the release of the Burning Crusade expansion pack, *World of Warcraft* players who achieve the new highest level of seventy can get flying mounts. Blizzard is raising the bar of the cool factor. What teenager would want to tool around in a parent’s Oldsmobile when he or she could drive a *flying car* instead? Just as in the contemporary American marketplace that *World of Warcraft* to a great extent mimics, these vehicles serve both a pragmatic function of getting the players around the fictional world more quickly and conveniently than their feet, and also as status symbols to differentiate the haves from the have-nots.

I hesitantly admit that because I had not managed to squirrel away enough gold to purchase a mount, Ulcharmin progressed through levels forty-one, forty-two, and forty-three without ever feeling the thrill of riding wolfback. I began to question my own virtual fiscal management skills. As my peers vaulted past me on their vaunted steeds while I trudged through the mud of the Swamp of Sorrows, the importance of the in-game economy became radically clear to me. I was mortified, and I needed to make some fast cash.

Around this time during my experience of the game, I became much more interested in the market dynamics involved in the game’s auction system. While NPC vendors will buy many items from players, in most cases the value of those items to vendors is far lower than

their value to other players on the open market. There are separate auction systems for the Horde, the Alliance, and in neutral cities. The auction system, like the mail system, involves a convenient anachronism. While much of the *World of Warcraft* seems modeled on a very analogue, medieval/feudal-style culture, both the game's mail system and auction system are based on more contemporary electronic mail systems and markets²¹. The market system functions much like eBay: players can choose the length of the auction, set an opening bid price, and can optionally choose a buyout price, at which the item will immediately be sold to the first buyer to hit that price. Very rare items are worth the most gold in the auction house. The developers of the game have a certain amount of control of the in-game economy, in that they control the "drop rate" of rare "blue" items and very rare "epic" or "purple" items. Around level forty however most players will have gathered only a few blue or purple items. At this point in the game, most of their activity in the auction house will likely have to do with what I would call "trading in commodities."

Because of their professional skills (e.g. herbalism, alchemy, or skinning), players able to earn salable goods not only by looting them from the corpses of the beasts, monsters, and other enemies they kill, but also in the more peaceful manner of the gentle gatherer and skillful tradesman. After I²² managed to obtain a short-term loan from Nuuna, the CEO of my

²¹ The postal system would stretch the credulity of the fictional world if one were to think about it too hard. It is difficult to imagine a real-world mail system in which one could attach a chain mail vest to a memo, which could be picked up by the recipient in whatever town he or she happened to be visiting at the time.

²² As is evidenced by use of "I" and "Ulcharmin," throughout this essay, the interface of *World of Warcraft* invites a good deal of avatarial confusion. While my avatar, Ulcharmin, benefited materially from Nuuna's loan, "I" was actually responsible for its repayment, and would have encountered social consequences if the debt were not repaid.

guild, to pay for the mount, Ulcharmin quickly skilled up in herbalism, spent much time picking flowers, and went to work playing the commodities market in the auction house.

While I earned the bulk of the capital necessary to repay my loan slaughtering pirates and miners in Stranglethorn Vale and looting their lifeless bodies of silver and copper coins, I earned a good deal of supplementary income by selling my wares in the auction house. Just as in real-world commodities markets, the prices for individual herbs fluctuate a great deal depending on the supply of and the demand for various commodities²³. Market timing also plays an important role in the pricing of *World of Warcraft* commodities. As I utilized the auction houses, I realized that there were arbitrage opportunities and other players who were taking advantage of those opportunities as commodities traders. At this time, I was playing *World of Warcraft* on a European server while living in and playing from the USA, typically during my evening, the wee hours of the morning in Europe. As a result, the servers were typically less populated while I was playing than during peak hours in Europe. While the market remains open during these off-peak hours, most players time their auctions to take place during peak play hours—and this created opportunities for me to have a greater deal of control over the market price of certain herbs during Europe’s off-hours. While fewer buyers were online, lesser quantities of the herbs were listed during these hours. Furthermore, while some players use plug-ins such as “Auctioneer” to scan the auction houses and determine the

²³ Though herbs have other uses, alchemists primarily use them as the raw material for potions. Interestingly, on the open marketplace, the constituent herbs used to make a potion will often cost more than the potion itself. This seeming contradiction might be explained by the fact that players training as alchemists need these raw materials in order to skill up their professional ability. While potions (such as a healing potion or an elixir of invisibility) can improve a player’s performance, only rarely are they essential to gameplay. This is also evidence that in some ways, the drive towards the avatar’s personal improvement (leveling up, advancing professional skills) has a stronger pull than any other metric of achievement within the game.

likely price at which a given item or commodity will sell, less-informed players will often list their herbs at lower prices. Some players or groups of players have this down to a science, and are able to more or less control the market price, stockpiling huge quantities of herbs, skins, metals, etc. and selling them in large batches. By buying up batches of herbs listed with inappropriately low buyout prices, however, and by taking advantage of my time differential (listing items while any sensible European was asleep), I was both able to build up large stores of herbs and often to underprice my European competitors, so that my lots would often be sold in the late night (USA)/ early morning (Europe), while the competition slept. I was able to turn a tidy profit and pay back my loan much more quickly than I would have been able to simply by grinding mobs.

In modeling a moderately complex economy, *World of Warcraft* offers its players training in the basics of supply and demand economics, markets, and arbitrage. While players are encouraged to perform repetitive labors throughout the game on behalf of their higher ranking superiors, during the mid-level (middle management) portion of the game, the game structure encourages a degree of entrepreneurship by motivating the player to participate in the auction house economy. Young players of *World of Warcraft* learn economic lessons far more sophisticated than saving pennies and nickels in their piggy banks for a desired toy. They learn how to engage with and play the fluctuations of an electronic marketplace that operates twenty-four hours a day. It is not a far leap to move from the auction houses of *World of Warcraft* to electronic trading of stocks, bonds, and commodities with an online broker. *World of Warcraft* certainly offers a more realistic model of the operations of financial markets than more traditional games used as tools to indoctrinate young capitalists, such as Parker Brothers' *Monopoly*.

While playing the commodities markets in the auction house is clearly a form of training in capitalism with an entrepreneurial bent, the majority of the play involved in advancing a *World of Warcraft* character is mindless and repetitive to the extent that it verges on Taylorism. There is an assembly-line mentality involved in many of the quests, many of which involve killing a staggering number of a certain type of beast or enemy (grinding), over and over again. There is little more novelty involved in grinding than there would be in welding two sections of a fender together, over and over again, all day long. Combat is a form of production, through which the avatar generates experience, currency, and reputation²⁴.

A case in point is the cluster of non-repeatable and repeatable quests involved in enhancing one's reputation with the furbolgs of Timbermaw Hold. Furbolgs are a race of creatures that appear to be something between Wookies and a demented nightmare version of teddy bears. While the majority of furbolgs are somehow "corrupted" and therefore make for good hunting, the furbolgs of Timbermaw Hold are a powerful faction. Players who can become allied with the Timbermaw can garner a number of benefits from the relationship. Just like levels and character attributes, in *World of Warcraft*, reputation is a quantifiable metric. The player can gain or lose reputation with the various factions depending on the quests performed and the number of members and enemies of the factions killed. All players start out with a hostile reputation with Timbermaw Hold. This might not be important were it not for the fact that one of the upper-level regions in the game, Winterspring, is nearly

²⁴ Although production takes the form of killing, there is a vast difference between the nature of death in *World of Warcraft* and death in the real world, in that NPC enemies killed in *World of Warcraft* regenerate a few minutes after their death. The player kills the NPC, harvests loot from the corpse, and a few minutes later the NPC is back. In many respects, battle in *World of Warcraft* works more like agriculture than war.

impossible to get to without going through Timbermaw Hold.²⁵ To get through Timbermaw Hold and secure safe passage to Winterspring, the player needs to earn a decent reputation with the Timbermaw. In order to do so, the player must kill hundreds of other furbolgs, the Timbermaw's enemies. The act of killing furbolgs lost its novelty within about fifteen minutes of play, yet I carried on for hours upon hours, motivated by the unseen wonders of Winterspring, this mysterious area of the game I would not know until I had proven myself to the Timbermaw. When I finally did get through the tunnel to visit that wintry land on the other side, you can imagine my shock and disappointment when I received my first quest in Winterspring. My charge there was to kill more furbolgs, this time those of the Winterspring clan. Needless to say, I am not among that elite group of players who have achieved "exalted" status and won the Defender of the Timbermaw trinket, which allows the player to summon a pet druid. To reach that goal, I would have needed to slaughter not hundreds, but thousands of furbolgs over perhaps one hundred hours of playing time.

The reputation metric is similar to the "honor" system, military ranks that players can achieve by waging war in PVP battlegrounds. Esther MacCallum-Stewart's essay in this volume details the military ranking system, which includes fifteen different steps for both the Horde and Alliance factions. From the standpoint of understanding *World of Warcraft* as a form of training in corporate ideology, the importance of honor and reputation are not trivial. Players climb a kind of corporate ladder through their efforts in battle, and along the way, it is important for them to remain focused on building positive reputations with various

²⁵ I say "nearly" because some members of my guild explained a way through that involves ghosts and resurrection without getting through Timbermaw Hold. This alternate route, however, involves subterfuge and a "deviant strategy," not one that is necessarily encouraged by the structure of the game itself.

factions. In addition, as previously discussed, the player's reputation with other is important. Just as in corporate life, without a good reputation as an industrious worker, it will be difficult for a player to succeed.

The fact that grinding is required to level up and achieve reputation cannot however alone explain why so many *World of Warcraft* players tolerate, or even welcome, the repetitiveness and tedium of grinding. I contend that the appeal of this type of activity is threaded deeper into the subconscious of the capitalist mind, which has been trained to appreciate work itself as a moral good. In writing of the "Protestant Work Ethic," Max Weber asserts that:

Waste of time is...the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election. Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health...is worthy of absolute moral condemnation. (Weber 157)

Through the lens of the protestant work ethic, the amount of time one spends in a MMORPG would undoubtedly seem a loss of time devoted to play and sociability, a luxury worthy of absolute moral condemnation. Play itself is a kind of sin. A form of play that consumes hundreds and hundreds of hours would almost surely condemn a good soul to hellfire and damnation. Blizzard and other game developers have however found a way to integrate the protestant work ethic into the design of their games: they have created an alternative universe in which play is a form of work. Players are willing to spend hundreds of hours in *World of Warcraft* not in spite of the fact that it often seems like tedious work, but precisely because of that fact. When play feels like labor, and one toils to achieve objectives, play does not feel like a *waste of time*. Play that feels like frivolous entertainment would be intolerable for the good capitalist. Play that feels like *work*, on the other hand, must be *good*.

While I believe that the equation between work and play in *World of Warcraft* is a sustained delusion that enables the player to waste time without seeming to, a form of suspension of disbelief, some outcomes of players' engagement with the game are in fact skills applicable in real-world business environments. In the April 2006 issue of *Wired* magazine, John Seely Brown, a person well accustomed to the demands of corporate leadership from his years as the director of Xerox Parc, praised experience as a *World of Warcraft* guild leader as a

total immersion course in leadership. A guild is a collection of players who come together to share knowledge, resources, and manpower. To run a large one, a guild master must be adept at many skills: attracting, evaluating, and recruiting new members; creating apprenticeship programs; orchestrating group strategy; and adjudicating disputes... Never mind the virtual surroundings; these conditions provide real-world training a manager can apply directly in the workplace.

One could consider grouping, advanced raid groups, and guilds as forms of managerial training. In large raid groups, players must manage their own activities in the context of up to forty other players working towards a common goal. Raid leaders must manage raid members effectively. Each class of player has different ways of inflicting damage on enemies and/or of caring for the wellbeing of members of the group. A successful raid is a complex project. It is common for raid leaders to use voice over IP software in order to direct their players under their command during a raid. T.L. Taylor's essay in this volume details how some mods (add-on software) allow raid leaders to monitor the performance of individual members of the group while a raid is unfolding, and to apportion loot as a reward or lack thereof as a punishment on the basis of each player's individual performance. In short, players who participate in raid group are often subject to an ongoing performance review, and those who lead raids function as their managers. Guilds, the core social unit in *World of Warcraft*, are

also often structured like companies. Most guilds hold regular meetings and have guild leaders (the in-game equivalent of a CEO) and other officers, such as a treasurer who maintains a guild bank. Guild leaders or an executive committee of officers arbitrate disputes, distribute loans, armor, and weaponry, and plan organized campaigns.

It is also the case that many people who join guilds together are simply moving a real-world social/professional network into *World of Warcraft*. The Truants are far from the only guild that has some professional association outside of the game world: it's not even the only guild composed primarily of new media researchers. The virtual world scholars who blog at Terra Nova²⁶ also have a researchers' guild running on a USA-based server. Venture capitalist and technology guru Joi Ito is the leader of the "We Know" guild, which also includes many other technology luminaries²⁷. Though this form of collegiality is clearly different from gabbing about how to hit the fourth quarter quotas while standing together on the fairway of a golf course waiting for the vice-president of sales to take his shot, it is not at all unusual for guild members to talk shop on the same chat channel that they are using to talk about whether or not to sheep the summoner before or after the tank takes out the dragonkin.

On the level of the real-world economy, the millions of players of *World of Warcraft* are through their subscription fees supporting a multinational corporation. Blizzard, the developer of *World of Warcraft*, is a subsidiary of Vivendi Games, a subsidiary of the conglomerate Vivendi, which owns a range of telecommunications, television, an entertainment companies. Within the confines of the gameworld, players are also active in a

²⁶ <http://terranova.blogs.com/>

²⁷ See CNET article "Power Lunching with Wizards and Warriors" at http://news.com.com/2100-1043_3-6039669.html for discussion of the "We Know" guild.

simulation of a society driven by allegiance to one of two multinational conglomerates, the Alliance or the Horde. Players further have allegiance to particular localities and racial groups, guilds, and raiding parties. While each business unit functions with a great deal of autonomy, and certain goal-oriented quests might cross established lines in pursuit of targets of opportunity, the social structures of *World of Warcraft* are in fact very similar to the interlocking and shifting hierarchies of multinational corporations such as Vivendi. In this chapter I have demonstrated just a few of the ways that the game itself trains its players how to function within the market economy of which *World of Warcraft* is a product, and for which it serves as a heuristic device. *World of Warcraft* players are both participating in the globalized economy as consumers and learning how to efficiently operate within it as “players” and good corporate citizens.

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