

## **World of Warcraft:**

### **History**

World of Warcraft (WoW) began life as a strategy game created by Blizzard Entertainment in the 1990s. The MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game) was launched in November 2004 in North America, Australia and New Zealand, followed by Korea, Europe, China, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau in 2005 and Thailand and Malaysia in 2007. It is available in seven different languages and charges a subscription fee of \$14.99 a month to play.

Players create an in-game character, or avatar, which they guide through the game to gain 'experience' and thus progress through various levels of seniority and difficulty. 'Experience' is gained by killing monsters, exploring new destinations and completing quests. There are ten races, nine classes of avatar to choose from and participants must select one of two warring factions to be a member of; Horde or Alliance. Once a player has chosen which faction they belong to, they can only interact or talk to players within the same faction, thus setting the two groups up as rivals whose only contact with one another is in battle. WoW is split into several 'realms' with a few thousand players in each. This is to accommodate the sheer size of the gaming community; each 'realm' is hosted on a separate server and can host around 20,000 players. Depending on which 'realm' you choose, the game-play features different amounts of combat player-versus-player combat.

### *Social interaction*

WoW is designed to facilitate extensive in-game socializing and many parts of the game are meant to be accomplished through coordination with other players. Communication is possible through text-based chat which may be private one-to-ones, within groups, between every member of a guild, broadcast to all players within a certain area, or reach all players in a given zone of the game. WoW encourages players to collaborate in two ways: firstly different character classes have specific abilities that complement each other and so those who play together should increase their efficiency. Secondly, many tasks are simply too difficult to be tackled alone. Players may either group together informally in small questing parties of up to five players and larger raiding parties of up to 40 players, or they may join together formally in guilds.

Guilds offer many benefits including free items, opportunities for groups and access to extra skills and tools. Players in good guilds can explore more of the game and such groups are taken very seriously by their members. Some of the high-ranking guilds, like the one formed by the noted Japanese venture capitalist Joi Ito, are mini-societies with their own websites, online forums and private lore. Ito's guild includes people he knew professionally; for example Ross Mayfield, CEO of an Internet company on whose board Ito sits. Mayfield describes WoW as 'the new golf' and says he's closed a deal with a company he met through the game. Take one example: [www.shadowspawnguild.com](http://www.shadowspawnguild.com) has over 120 active members and describes itself as a 'casual guild'. Membership requires that each player agrees to a code of conduct, which focuses on each player respecting one another and emphasizes the guild's 'open to all' policy. The group has 'teamspeak' which allows players to

communicate using Voice of IP technology. Members must keep in regular contact with the guild; after 30 days of inactivity, the individual's account is removed.

Beyond this anecdotal evidence, however, there is a lack of a strong academic consensus on the nature and extent of social interaction in WoW. Beginning with the introduction of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) in the late 1970s, computer games utilized the internet to allow players to interact with one another via the medium of the game. In MUDs, players interacted with each other and the computer controlled characters via text-based commands. MMORPGs are more complex descendents of these early games. There is a wider literature examining the nature of social interaction in these new social spaces; however I have focused only on data relating specifically to WoW. It seems that, for a limited number of players, meaningful relationships have either extended into WoW or, for a few, grown from in-game interaction. For the majority of players, however, their social experience of gaming is heavily influenced by the architecture of the game, which is conducive to a number of specific types of social interaction, perhaps unique to MMORPGs. See below for a summary of two articles on this subject.

'Alone together? Exploring the social dynamic of massively multiplayer online games'

Nicolas Ducheneaut, Nicholas Yee, Eric Nickell, Robert J Moore, *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2006

Ducheneaut et al tackle two popular conceptions about the massive popularity of WoW. Firstly, that the game allows for 'casual' play where individuals can leave the game for relatively long periods of time, without their characters' in-game performance diminishing. WoW, in contrast to other games, gives 'experience' points for rest periods where the player is inactive. Secondly, they address the conception that it is the level of social interaction that keeps players coming back. They argue that WoW has an addictive and carefully crafted reward structure, and that the 'rest' function is not sufficient to allow users to keep up. Data collected by the study suggests that players engage in social behaviour when it is necessary for their instrumental success in the game. Informal grouping is an inefficient way to progress through the game ('leveling') and many players are not observed in this kind of collaborative exercise until they reach the final, more demanding, tasks of the game, which are more difficult to complete alone. Thus collaborative activity such as questing or raiding together is instrumentally used, not practiced as a social exercise for its own sake.

Ducheneaut et al also looked at the social activity within formal groups of players. 66% of WoW's characters were found to be a member of a guild; this number increases to 90% for higher level characters. Those who were members of guilds played for longer. Through a statistical analysis of the networks in guilds, it was shown that although they tend to be 'sparsely knit' networks, they also include central cores of players who are 'tight knit' and not only play together, but play together for longer. There was found to be a fairly low level of commitment to guilds with almost a quarter of them disappearing each month and a high number of members leaving to be replaced by new ones.

This is not to say the social factor in WoW is unimportant. The existence of

others playing the game simultaneously provides for three social affects: 1.) they are an audience – to showcase your character’s accomplishments and adornments 2.) they are a social presence – existence of chat feature which can be heard by a wider audience means that there is a constant stream of conversations continuing in the background of play – a bit like sitting in a cafe 3.) a spectacle – amusement and entertainment – there are various objects incorporated into the game for humorous effect

In sum, ‘community’ in MMORPGs tend to be defined in reference to mythical old villages where everybody knows and interacts with everybody; but WoW demonstrates a large community of gamers with more indirect relationships. Star Wars Galaxies was a game explicitly designed to emphasize the more social aspects of multiplayer gaming, yet this made for slow player progress. The game was less successful than WoW and peaked at 300,000 subscribers. The problem with WoW in terms of fostering social interaction is leveling. It is difficult to level in big social groups early on and the rest function does not allow users to keep up. The study concludes that MMORPGs may not support social play very well and they are critical of a lack of good social navigation tools within the game.

‘From tree house to barracks: The social life of guilds in WoW’  
Dmitri Williams, Nicolas Ducheneaut, Li Xiong, Yuanyuan Zhang, Nick Yee, Eric Nickell,  
*Games & Culture*, 2006 October; 1 (4): 338-361.

Williams et al argue that WoW is a vibrant ‘third place’, populated by a variety of social experiences ranging from ephemeral impersonal groups to sustained and deep relationships that extend offline. The architecture of the game moulds these social behaviours - this is not to say all such actions are controlled from above - only that social interactions are formed within the pre-existing environment of the game. Guilds are a primary example of this; the most common reason given for joining a guild was to accomplish game goals, however the study finds that some social activity went beyond this instrumental stage.

The study examined three servers and found that around half of the characters in each were guild members. However, around 20% of guilds had only one member. Apparently formed solely for vanity, these guilds were created by other members joining merely to facilitate the labeling of the original player and then leaving. They found a large number of small guilds, a steady decline in the number of moderate-sized guilds, a slight increase in large guilds and then a steady tail off in the number of very largest guilds. WoW provides very little support for guilds. The only game based tools are a guild roster and a reserved guild chat channel accessible to all members. Any formal organization beyond this has to come from the players themselves.

The study created a typology of guilds. Roughly 60% of interviewees said they belonged to a social guild where the game’s goals were secondary to the social interactions that occur while pursuing those goals. In many of these cases, the social interactions were extensions of real-world social bonds. Even when a guild member labeled their guild as something else, the social aspect of their membership still showed through. In nearly every social guild that lasted more than a month, members and leaders were aware of the need for a certain level of maturity, responsibility and player welfare. Other guilds

included PvP (Player versus Player) where the primary goal is battle with the other faction. Williams et al consider this sort of play to have social aspects similar to going to the park with friends to play football. Similarly, a 'raiding guild' – which constituted 35% of the sample – displayed social characteristics. Its primary function is to organize a 40-member team event lasting between 2 and 8 hours, often involving careful management. A raid is the most complex team-based task within the game and to perform well, each player must act in the best interests of the group. Finally role-playing guilds, where players are always 'in-character', also focused on creating helpful relationships.

Guild size was found to be significant. Smaller guilds tended to be more focused on social bonds, larger guilds focused more on game goals. As guild size increased, they were also more likely to engage in formal management and organisational practices such as maintaining an external message board, web site, sign-up system and VoIP system. Small guilds (fewer than 10 members), however, represented the strongest bonding social capital. They represented strong real-world bonds that extended into WoW, rather than being formed there. Roughly 75% of small guilds featured some founding unit of real-life friends or family. In small guilds, previously unknown people were also more likely to extend their relationships outside WoW by talking via VoIP/phone. Researchers identified a few cases where relative strangers met each other in person. The small groups were also most likely to have migrated en masse from another MMORPG and the game functioned as a way to maintain real-world bonds, often within families and coworkers. They tended to display egalitarian organization and a dislike of military style hierarchy often maintained through humour.

The medium sized guilds still placed emphasis on social bonds and families, but with more members, there was found to be greater instances of conflict in styles or ethics. This size range did have cases of players being kicked out for violating guild ethics, such as racism. This is the first appearance of conflicting goals where guilds are a mixture of those who care about social support and those who are using the guild to achieve goals elsewhere.

There is a noticeable change in large and huge guilds, manifested in a much greater need for formal organization, both for political and practical purposes. Groups with more than 35 members suddenly exhibit the need for leadership, although that function is not always performed well. This might include rules, probationary periods, attendance policies or formal sign-ups for activities. A mission statement was nearly always understood to exist, on at least an informal basis, but they were only codified in about half of the guilds. Williams et al compare these groupings to a team within a recreational sports league, as opposed to a small group of friends who play sport casually. Around 60% of guild members used VoIP in some way, although it is not built into the game itself. The larger the group, the more likely they were to use this. Nearly every user recognized it as an aid in coordinating large groups and in forming strategy in fluid situations.

Similar to research reported by Ducheneaut et al, this study finds that guilds are still fragile institutions with a high turn-over of members. Players left when the guilds failed to forward their individual objectives and other complaints included elitism, social distance, poor leadership, lack of players of a similar standard to play with and the wrong level of seriousness (too high or

low). Good leadership is key to a guild. Some large guilds functioned as a “virtual barracks” with task-oriented, military style hierarchies. Others managed to maintain casual social atmosphere similar to that of children’s tree house. It was striking how much sociability occurs over and above basic gameplay: roughly 70% of interviewees said they chatted regularly with their guild mates ranging from game strategy to real-life personal issues. Some leaders even gave out phone numbers and made themselves accessible when not playing.

Williams et al argues that – as with other online communication tools – the game supports the creation of bonding social capital. At least of a third of all guild players surveyed were playing with real-life friends, however players nearly always made sharp distinctions between real-life and WoW friends. A small number of players reported meeting new people with whom they had bonded in-game and those relationships had then extended back out into real life. In contrast, approximately a third to a half of players used their guilds as more casual third places that generated bridging social capital but rarely bonding. Remaining players saw their guild mates as unimportant beyond accomplishing game tasks.

The study concludes that the governing software architecture provided a foundation for players to build on, rather than being entirely controlling. They compared playing WoW to the kind of sociability found in a team sport, which has its own rules, literal boundaries and social norms. This suggests that the game is a place where meaningful social interaction is possible and this takes new forms because of the nature of the game.

### **Critics**

The primary criticism relating to WoW is its addictive nature. It is estimated that the average player spends around 21 hours per week in-game. On study found that in the first eight months of the game being released, 15% of all characters in WoW were at level 60 and estimated that they had therefore played the game for the equivalent of two man-months to achieve this. The existence of computer game addiction as a disorder in its own right is disputed. There have been a number of highly publicized cases of individual gamers causing harm to themselves or others after playing the game excessively and in 2005, the Chinese government imposed restrictions on the amount of time individuals could play on online games, including WoW, to stem addiction problems.

### **Economy**

World of Warcraft has spawned a bustling economy. There are a number of external sites where players can buy various in-game artifacts. There is a thriving industry in ‘gold farming’, where players accumulate in-game currency before selling it on to others for real money (RMTs – real-money trades). Players can also pay for ‘power leveling’, where someone else takes on their avatar and ‘grinds’ it through the game to gain experience. For example, IGE the self-proclaimed ‘leading MMORPG services company’, sells gold, items, accounts and power leveling on a variety of servers for both the WoW US and European game. You can currently purchase a male night elf on the Aegwynn US Alliance server, complete with armor and other possessions, for \$829.99. At one point you could buy 100 grams of WoW gold for \$9.99 on

eBay or pay \$269 for another player to work your character up to Level 60, returning it after 15 days. However in January of this year, eBay banned trading in such virtual goods because of the question of legality raised by game makers. Estimates for the value of the RMT market – for all online games, not just WoW – lie between \$250 million and \$880 million a year.

This economy has developed its own low-paid workforce. Estimates vary, but there may be between 100,000 and 500,000 people working in China in the 'gold farming' industry. These workers operate in sweatshops for the virtual world: they 'play' for up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They have strict quotas and are employed in conditions which have come to resemble the sweatshops which produce cheap goods to be exported abroad. Most players make less than a US quarter an hour, but they often get somewhere to live and free computers on which to play. There have been reports of these virtual sweatshops using 300 computers and workers staring at screens for 18 hours a day. Blizzard takes the position that using real money to gain an edge in the game violates WoW's egalitarian spirit. But as gaming companies become wise to the exploitations of the virtual economy, the Chinese factories operate increasingly by stealth; hiding online identities, employing hackers and creating automatic ways to increase their productivity. MMORPG economies have grown to such an extent that the US Congress is investigating the revenue produced by virtual transactions to determine what taxation regulations should be introduced.

### **User numbers and growth**

- It has a subscriber base of more than 8.5 million. This is greater than the population of London, which stands at around 7.2 million.
- Its first expansion for the MMORPG, 'World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade', recently sold 2.4 million copies in its first 24 hours and around 3.5 million copies within the first month – a record-setting amount.
- It is estimated that Blizzard has made more than \$300 million from the game so far.
- WoW has shown that people are willing to pay for content online. It had previously been argued that this format would never work; WoW has shown that a mass market does exist.