
Does WoW Change Everything?

How a PvP Server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause

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Rather than simply identifying “emergence” as a prime property of massively multiplayer online game life, a better understanding of the complex nature of player-produced culture is needed. Life in game worlds is not exempt from forms of player-based regulation and control. Drawing on ethnographic and interview work within World of Warcraft, the author undertakes initial inquiries on this subject by looking at three areas: nationalism, age, and surveillance. This case study shows systems of stratification and control can arise from the bottom up and be implemented in not only everyday play culture but even player-produced modifications to the game system itself. Due to the ways these systems may simultaneously facilitate play, there is often an ambivalent dynamic at work. This piece also prompts some methodological considerations. By discussing field site choice, the author argues that context is of utmost importance and needs to be more thoughtfully foregrounded within game studies.

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In the past I have written on things like the relationship between offline and online experience, age diversity in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), and the positive potential of productive players. But World of Warcraft has challenged several of my previously held beliefs about massively multiplayer online games. While I continue to find resonance with these themes within my EverQuest (EQ) research, my time in WoW has only brought home for me even more the imperative for reflective analysis on the specificities of not only particular games but particular servers and specified contexts.

Ethnographers, and indeed qualitative researchers in general, are always aware of the ways their method is tied up with the specificity and context of a field site. Close, in-depth case studies, although they can be used to help illuminate broader processes, find their core strength in the ability to tell a nuanced story of actual practices and meanings of local cultures and participants. And yet I see now we have a fair number of studies that have focused on a very small number of MMOGs through which we are beginning to get an implied generalized theory of online games. I want to propose caution and case study diversity before we too quickly settle on the meaning of these game worlds and the processes that occur in them.

I moved out of the United States in 2003, and when I found myself in February of 2005 taking up WoW to play alongside some of my students I was relegated to a European English server. Because I was also playing with people I knew offline I followed their server preferences and ended up on a player-versus-player (PvP) server. These two factors—a European English and PvP server—were dramatically different from my time in EQ (or for that matter, any of the other MMOGs I had played in the intervening years) and I would argue significantly affected several phenomena I previously discussed. Although I do not want to overstate my claim and suggest that the following are completely new and unique to WoW, I want to highlight that the following consideration is strongly informed by the specific context of a particular European PvP WoW server as my field site. In part, what I argue is that we need renewed efforts to understand the role systems of stratification and forms of social control play in these game worlds. Rather than simply identifying “emergent culture” as a prime property of MMOG life and stopping there, we also need a better understanding of the complex nature of player-produced culture and its relation to technical game artifacts. In the following I begin some initial inquiries on this within the context of WoW by looking at three areas: nationalism, age, and surveillance.

Location Still Matters

One of the things often remarked in previous work on MMOGs (and virtual worlds in general) is the fact that people play with each other across regions and even countries. The cross-national nature of these spaces has long been seen as one of their promises. Indeed, there is even hope by some that they might, because of their cross-cultural potential, step into the space previously held by more formal “public diplomacy” organizations (see e.g., the University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy and their virtual world initiative). As we encounter people from other countries and cultures in mundane, playful situations, the artificial or corrosive boundary lines that shape offline life might be productively eroded. Or if you prefer a more multicultural model, through coming to learn about, debate, and value our diverse orientations, cultures, and backgrounds within the realm of online play, MMOGs retain enormous potential in a fairly divisive world. Although I certainly think there is something to this line, having witnessed it in varying degrees throughout the years, we need to be cautious to not underplay the difficult work player communities engage in when they negotiate this aspect of identity and community and, just as important, the active role game companies and the structure of games are taking in mediating it.

This hit home for me one night while hanging around outside the auction house in the city of Ogrimmar, the Orc capital city within World of Warcraft. Several players were standing around speaking in Danish to each other via the say mode (proximity-based communication in which only those nearby would hear). Another player not a part of their group interjected:

Player 1: english in general please

P2: this is not general!

P1: it doesn't matter, english in all channels apart from tells

P3 [part of the Danish-speaking group]: err nope dude

P1: no, english en general chats is the rule

P1: in*

P2: say has no rules for that

P4 [another member of the group]: well . . . ah ah ah . . . you can't touch me

P1: english in all chat apart from /w [whisper, private messages from one player to another]

P1: its in the server rules

P1: go read if you don't believe me

At first I thought this was simply an anomaly. I didn't recall hearing many (if any) such conversations on my EverQuest server so I made a note of it in my journal and continued on.¹ Over time however, I came to see the complicated role language and national identity played on our server. Players were frequently reprimanded when they spoke on public channels in languages other than English or, as with all the guilds I have been in, guild chat. Players regularly say that Blizzard prohibits anything other than English in nonprivate speech, often directing people (as in the previous incident) to "go read the rules." In an interesting twist however, Blizzard's actual rules on the subject are much more open.² The following statement (undated and unsigned but by the tone I venture a guess it first appeared on a forum) found in their "Frequently Asked Questions" noted,

Lately we have received a number of players who are concerned about the languages used by other players on the English servers, and I would like to take a moment to clarify our policy and the reason for the choices we have made.

We have a lot of different nationalities playing together on the English servers, which is great. We call them English servers because the game client is in English, the support is in English and we recommend that people speak English in the general chat. The last part is a recommendation however, it is not a requirement.

While it is more polite to speak a language that most of the game community understands, we do not want to force people to exclusively speak a language which is not their mother tongue while they are playing. Most don't have a problem with speaking English, but to some it is difficult.

In terms of rules and sanctions, we strongly recommend people to speak English, but using other languages in the general chat is not something we will take sanctions against. On the flip side, all our policies regarding in game behaviour apply, no matter what language you speak. If you are spamming, harassing or similar, we will sanction those actions in accordance with our policies. (Blizzard 2006c)

Of course on the European English servers (vs. e.g., the U.S. or designated German or French ones) there is a default multinationalism at work in the very structure of the space, and this must be negotiated somehow. Despite the client program and all of the

game world being in English, the player base is made up of people from a diverse set of countries including not only those in Western Europe but Eastern Europe and Middle East regions as well. For many guilds, this negotiation means choosing to work in English and often specifying clearly that members must be fluent in English (regularly noting it in their applicant information for prospective members). It is important to keep in mind how this regulation around English speaking is simultaneously tied into much broader demographic and regional issues. Not everyone is afforded extensive English education (this can be due to age, class, educational system, etc.), and neither do all countries approach the training and adoption of English in the same way, and so this very particular construction of “multinational” or “European” space is also deeply stratified from the outset. Analyses that foresee MMOGs as a place for cross-cultural border crossing need to be aware of the everyday context these games operate within and certainly how they are situated within a much broader, often ambivalent conversation about, for example, European identity and transnationalism.

Partially in response to this situation there are guilds that have decided to form around national identity. You thus encounter guilds advertising themselves as, for example, Danish or Swedish speaking (sometimes worded as “for Swedish players”). Although these nationally based guilds can on one hand provide a friendly and familiar space for their members to play, they can also signify more than they may intend due to the emergent quality of gameplay itself. Take, for example, the guild who named itself the Serb Vanquishers.³ They were a very active PvP guild and were known for not hesitating to kill any horde they saw regardless of level difference. On a number of occasions I heard other players equate their play style with their national identity, often either “reading into” their play or developing a vision of Serbian identity based on the style of this one guild. Similarly, bias, generalizations, and stereotypes about particular countries could often be heard in informal discussions (“The Brits are always logging on drunk”). Of course sometimes these comments are meant jokingly among guild mates of different national origin as a way of teasing each other, but they also emerge as tentative asides and explanatory devices. My point here is not to suggest that somehow Blizzard should try and ban or regulate the importation of national identities into the game (indeed it is naïve to think they could do so) but to simply suggest that players not only bring in existing meaning systems about their and others’ national context but may even develop (or at the minimum reify) opinions in relation to gameplay.

We can see as well how sometimes these formulations of the “other” player can escape their original game’s context and become a kind of pan-game stereotype. The construction of the “Chinese gold farmer” is another thread in this line. In this case, such a designation has become a kind of broad epithet, mixing the frustration some feel with real-money trade (RMT) with an overextended (and xenophobic) stereotype about which kinds of players are “ruining the game world.” Although it is certainly not only Chinese workers participating in the growing economy of RMT practices in MMOGs, as a tag the conflation of *Chinese* with *gold farmer* has seemed to come all too easy and now transcends any particular game.⁴ The issue is not only the imagined

ethnic construction of the player harvesting in-game resources but that those who do not have a command of English and are hunting in a particular area may be automatically assumed to be hired worker. As Nick Yee (2006) suggested,

What fascinates me is how race/nationality is now invoked to create the social category known as “gold farmers” (rather than the other way around). For example, players who pass the “English Test” aren’t “gold farmers” even if they farm all day. But ironically, players who don’t speak fluent English (i.e., French) are at risk of being branded as “Chinese gold farmers.”

Such (potential) designations can have consequences to the artifact of the game itself. Constance Steinkuehler (2005) has done some of the most interesting work to date on this subject within her ethnography of *Lineage II*. She noted in her discussion of the practice of adena farming in that game that at this point, an entire type of character, the female dwarf, has become so strongly associated as the avatar of choice for RMT workers that regular players choose to avoid it when creating their character. She wrote,

In essence, there is now an unfortunate feedback loop such that, because other players assume all girl dwarves to be farmers, only the farmers care to play them. Girl dwarfs are now reviled by many players, systematically harassed, and unable to find anyone that will allow them to hunt in their groups, unless of course someone already knows the “person” beneath the “pigtails.” In a way, it seems as if a whole new form of virtual racism has emerged, with an in-game character class unreflectively substituted in for unacknowledged (and largely unexamined) real world differences between China and America, such as economic disparity, cultural difference, language barriers, and discrepant play styles. (p. 11)

This shift is more than “skin deep” at the avatar level however as she additionally shows how this construction of who farmers are has altered gameplay in profound ways. She wrote,

Moreover, prolific adena farming has also motivated non-farmers to forgo the usual between-clan competitions that, in *Lineage I*, created a rich political community of varying factions and alliances vying for castle control. Instead, folks are joining forces in a sort of “us versus them” mentality to wage perpetual field war against all (perceived) Chinese. In other words, the one game mechanic that made *Lineage* unique—clan sieges for castle control—has been substituted by a game mechanic of quite a different sort: farmer farming. (p. 12)

She goes on to recount a player-produced video that typifies this stance in that it chronicles players taking matters into their own hands by going throughout the game world and killing off those they think are farmers. When I set out to find a copy of this video myself by Googling its title I instead found re-creations of the same event in *WoW*.

Of course the dynamic around this language and the ways players negotiate it is not uniform. Just as often, *Chinese* is dropped from the *gold farmer* tag, or it is challenged within the space by players. My point here is to highlight the complex and often uneasy relationship designations around ethnicity and national identity may have within the game world. I am incredibly sympathetic to Steinkhuehler (2006) when she writes,

I must admit, I do admire the coordinated and collaborative efforts the game community has made in response to what they see as a genuine threat to the game's integrity. This is, after all, what I mean by "interactively stabilized game balance" based in no small part on the emergent community practices of those who actually inhabit a given designed game space. It is disturbing, however, that it is fueling a longstanding animosity between Asians and Americans within the game. There is a history of discrepant game play in Lineage that unfortunately falls along ethnic lines, and the fact that the two populations have a hard time communicating across a real language barrier surely doesn't help. (p. 13)⁵

We need to take into account the complicated role one's offline location and national identity can play within the game space. Although there are certainly success stories of people having their stereotypes undermined or challenged, there are also many moments along the way in which practices and opinions may work more conservatively. As companies try to pitch their games to even wider audiences they are also constructing systems to attend to diverse demographics. Stratification and systems of categorization become embedded, indeed embodied, within technical systems. Methods to deal with conflict and complexity can get folded into game architectures and automated systems. As a result, we get things like the segregation of servers based on region and language, or the growing use of "instanced" game content. Although there is something evocative about the image of a global gaming, we need to pay careful attention to the everyday practices players and game companies are using to negotiate that field in complex and at times worrisome ways.

Age Ambivalence

In many ways the varying degrees of stratification we see around this issue of language and nationalism in MMOGs also emerge with the issue of age. In my previous work I was struck by how many adults and kids played alongside each other, very often as peers, in these game worlds. Whether it was parents whose familial relations were altered by playing with their child who was better at the game than them or guild mates that spanned across generations, it certainly seemed to be that typical age boundaries were challenged. Although it is still the case in WoW that the player population is diverse and that adults, teens, and children play alongside each other in the game world, I also see renewed tendencies to segregate groups.

The role of age in WoW seems to me very ambivalently situated for many players. On one hand there is a general acknowledgement that young players can be quite good at their characters and polite, sociable people in the game. You still regularly see adults playing alongside youth. And yet there is also a strong undercurrent you hear in conversations (often on the heels of frustrating situations like item stealing or certain forms of player killing) that lays blame for the ills of the game at the feet of “12 year old boys” or “the kids.” Much like the side comments on national identities, these remarks are often made offhand, and people can be quick to slide the conversation back to the idea that they have seen adults behave as poorly. Yet as with the issue of national identity, I started to watch more carefully for patterns. Whereas the lower end of the game can seem fairly open in terms of age, it can change dramatically for players as they progress. This shift is also a reminder that we need to account for the ways games are not static systems but may in fact evolve over the course of play and that snapshots taken in the early stages of a game (or players’ experience in it) may not tell the full story.

On my PvP server age segregation has become fairly institutionalized at the high end. A large number of raiding guilds set age requirements to join. Indeed, age is only one component of a much longer list of qualifications guilds can seek including particular language skills, gear, and other behavior they expect from their members. In this regard, age is really only one part of a broader system of stratification at work. The following (from the guild named simply <Guild>) is a fairly typical application players encounter:

Include your name and age and where you live, what you work with (or not work with), your hobbies or wutteva etc. Make it a bit personal

Your character:

- * Professions ?
- * Talent Build?
- * End-game experience (BWL, MC, ZG, AQ, SFK & Deadmines)
- * What do you think your role is in a raids?
- * What’s your goal with the char? what do want to achive/what have you achived?
- * Your DPS profile. (Make one here. [[links to CTPProfiles.net](#)]) Show it!
- * Your Fire Resist profile.

The guild:

- * What can you contribute with?
- * Why do you want to join <Guild> and not another guild?
- * Write a bit about your guild history. Which guilds were you in before, and why did you leave ?

The game:

- * Do you focus on Pve or Pvp?
- * How long have you played WoW?

- * How many hours/day are you able to play?
- * Are there certain things that makes you unable to participate in raids etc. at times? (Like heartattacks, abusive bosses, random goat attacks, etc. . .)

. . . now you don't have to include all of this off course, but we get lots of applicants & you need to give us a reason to invite *you*. Not reading a thread that is clearly called "Read before applying", is immediate disqualification => (<Guild>, 2006)

One of the fascinating things about guild applications and the information they seek is that they are only verified in a limited way. Player communities have built technical systems to allow them to check information, as in the case with profile applications that automatically log your character's equipment and update it to a Web site for others to review. But for the most part, no one formally checks to confirm someone is 18 years of age (or their time played or knowledge of English). In many ways, these applications act as a symbolic gatekeeper where answers are taken on faith and verified through firsthand experience with a player once they join a guild (typically during a "trial" period).

So why has this practice around age emerged so strongly? I have heard two theories posited by players with some regularity, and I find both fairly compelling. The first relates to the image Blizzard has long held in the mind of gamers as a maker of hardcore strategy and action games (via Diablo and the Star-/Warcraft series). WoW, while occupying a place in a much longer history of game-based virtual worlds, has also by association with its developer come to stand in a somewhat unique category. Players often remark on how Blizzard's reputation drew in many more young players, ones who may not have been particularly attuned to (or ready for) the social complexities these online game worlds have long offered. So although the brand recognition of the game pulled in atypical MMOG players, they find themselves uneasily living within a genre they may have very little familiarity with.

The second hypothesis is much more specific to the gameplay of WoW. A number of people I have spoken with remark that it is simply much easier than games like EQ and therefore is more amenable to a broader, younger demographic.⁶ It is then not that younger players could not be found in EQ but that they were a very self-selected group—ones willing to endure a much longer struggle given the game's difficulty. And considering how long it took people to advance in that game, they were also players committed, often over a number of years, to the community. In WoW by contrast, similar players are able to completely level up and reach the high-end game in well under a year. Whereas success in EQ depended in large part on becoming socialized into the game and deep reliance on the community to succeed, the mechanics and structure of WoW do not breed this kind of training and mentoring (at least prior to the high end).

It is also worth considering that when EQ was first released the genre was not as mainstream as it is now. Younger players often came to it via family that already were playing or at the very least had to convince parents to sign them up using a credit card.⁷

It would be interesting to know the effect things like game subscription cards, which take the credit-card-holding parent out of the middleman position, have had in opening up the market and changing the demographics in important ways. Of course in past games it was not unusual for *kids* and *troublemakers* to be used as synonyms, but the quantitative difference makes a qualitative difference, and I have been struck by the much more ambivalent role of age in WoW and the ways players frequently reify its importance, especially at the high end.⁸ It is still to be seen if the lessened importance of age previous 'net communities afforded their members survives within WoW. At the minimum however, it now appears to act as one of several factors in a system that attempts to categorize, catalog, and situate players.

The Complex Status of Emergent Culture

In both my discussion of age and national identity in WoW I have highlighted several ways the game community is negotiating through (generally informal) social mechanisms the management and stratification of players. The third area I want to discuss is the role of productive players within the game and some of the effects we can see from this. One of the things WoW has innovated is the malleability of their user interface (UI). Much like how previous games such as Asheron's Call allowed users to modify the UI, Blizzard has constructed its game system so that player-developers can dramatically change not only the way it looks but indeed how the game is experienced and played.⁹ This means that UI modifications (mods) are not simply cosmetic but can provide core functionality to the game, even altering the nature of play itself. Some of the mods currently available allow you to do things like add special timers to your game window so you can see when spells are fading, easily swap out gear and equipment with one click, and even instantly heal people if they get below a certain prespecified damage threshold.

This kind of development is compelling for those of us drawn to the notion of productive player communities and the organic relationship between the system and participants. But I want to also issue a bit of a reminder that emergence should not be equated with the free, utopic, nonhierarchical, or unfettered. Neither should we assume that players have any clear or uniform opinion about such interventions and may, even if deploying them, hold somewhat ambivalent feelings. To illustrate this more complicated picture I will briefly look at two particular mod interventions—damage meters and high-end raid tools.

Damage meters are, as one might guess from their name, tools that calculate the amount of damage individual players are doing to opponents (either other players or nonplayer characters). They then typically visually represent this information in real time within the UI and can also be output as text, complete with statistics and rankings.¹⁰ Damage meters can be a useful tool for players in showing them how they compare to others in their group or raid, often acting as a notification system in case

Figure 1
A Screenshot From a Raid on Molten Core With the Damage
Meter Shown on Far Right Listing All Players' Names



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

they are doing too little or too much damage to an opponent. They can either be used privately—as when someone has one running and simply watches the tally to see their and others' performance—or collectively, by publicizing the results in text to a chat channel (Figure 1).

Damage meters occupy an interesting position as a sociotechnical object. Many players find them helpful in managing their gameplay and providing incentive or reassurance. For some groups they can also be playful objects, letting people tease each other and engage in friendly competition through sharing the rankings. Yet there are also instances in which this tool seems to incite frustration and evoke ambivalence. Because of the way they work, the proper use of meters needs some care (they need to be reset, they may not catch all the actual damage happening, and their results are often more accurate if several people run them simultaneously and

synchronize the tally). They are however often used much more casually, and so people can be left feeling that the meter is not correctly reporting information. This sentiment is tied though to a deeper ambivalence about their use. Damage meters quantify and rank a particular player's contribution to a fight, but they can only capture one aspect of that contribution. As a game modification they are quite interesting in the kind of social work they attempt to do and the symbolic power they can hold. Because they present their findings within the UI and as quantifiable data, they can seem part of the core game system, and the seamlessness of their integration can hide the way they are actually grafted onto the game, potentially imperfectly. Because there is also no way to quantify all the other nondamage labor players contribute to a group, some can feel that their contributions are not meaningfully accounted for or just as important, represented.¹¹ The graphical or statistical recounting of damage data can dwarf all other aspects of play and group participation. Yet damage meters can act as a powerful stratification tool.

Although it is not unusual to find people dumping damage meter outputs to pick-up groups as a way of either touting accomplishments or trying to get others to do better, within guilds the use of damage meters is often much more regulated. For some guilds they can be used as incentive devices, promoting both individual refinement of skills or in-group competition. But, just as many prohibit their use or distribution of their output to chat channels. For some guild and raid leaders damage meters are seen as promoting unhealthy competition that leads to the overall detriment of the group. Individual (over-) achievement (seeking to be top of the damage meter) can be seen as jeopardizing the group's success. For example, racing to the top of the damage meter can often result in "overnuking," thereby disrupting the tactics and security of the entire raid. Sometimes guilds have provisions that output from meters can only be done after a raid or only by certain members. One important lesson we might take from this is the way the damage meter as a technical object can only be meaningfully understood within specific social contexts. For the pick-up group who is focused on one specific time-bounded task it can present some immediate feedback on performance and efficacy. Such a group may be less concerned with evaluating in any holistic way the value of individual players. But for the guild (or a group of friends), the data it reflects may pose troublesome as it does not account for the full range of contribution the participants may bring to the collective.

Without many of these mods a player's performance must be interpreted in total. Aspects cannot be separated and quantified out. Whereas impressions certainly form about who is skilled, particularly powerful, and helpful, they are not visually represented within the system or broken down into numbers. In most situations there is much more breadth to the construction of accomplished play, and people come to be thought of as good players and valuable members to have around because of a variety of factors, actual damage output being only one. But this holistic approach (often involving the nonquantifiable) does not translate well into a mod. There is an interesting tension between play becoming sharply rationalized not only in its execution

but its evaluation via these tools and the more qualitative assessments of players that emerge over time within groups. The tool becomes an actor involved in the ongoing construction of play in a particular form.¹² And to do this kind of work—for the system to be instrumentalized in this way—there must be in place a method to watch.

One predominant trend that has arisen in WoW through mod development—a system that promotes active productive engagement by the players in shaping their game experience—is an extensive network of tools and functions that consistently monitor, surveil, and report at a micro level a variety of aspects of player behavior.¹³ Worth critically noting here is that these developments are instigated, promoted, and adopted by participants themselves. Whereas a fair amount of work and concern about technology, the Internet, and surveillance has focused on either (a) the role of the state or institutions watching individuals or (b) the gaze of individuals turned in on themselves and the coercive effects of such (see e.g., Brignall, 2002; Forester & Morrison, 1994; Jordan, 1999; Lyon, 1994; Penny, 1994; Poster, 1990; Zuboff, 1988), we might meaningfully distinguish between those modes and (c) one of *coveillance* in which there is lateral observation between community members (Andrejevic, 2005; Lianos, 2003; Mann, Nolan, & Wellman, 2003).¹⁴ The use of these tools in a game setting, in which *co/surveillance* may at times intersect with playfulness and a desire for efficient action, further complicates things. We generally think of this kind of monitoring as pernicious, with evocations of Bentham's panopticon from Foucault (1979). Mark Poster (1990) suggested that the perfection of means of surveillance through new technologies creates a "superpanoptic" moment in which we are not only disciplined to surveillance but to "participating in the process" (p. 93). But within the context of games and play, being watched (or watching) might actually be fun (Albrechtslund & Dubbeld, 2005). How do we understand "participatory surveillance" within games? We have to consider the ways these tools do important work in assisting collaborative play, especially at the high end of the game. Again, the social context in which the tools are deployed matters greatly as, with the case of damage meters, they can be used in a variety of modes and are therefore understood by players in quite diverse ways. The challenges this poses to the interpretive work we do when analyzing games should not be understated.

To illustrate (and complicate) this further I will pull in another example from one of the most widely used high-end UI mods, CTMod (CT) and its companion, CTRaidAssist (CTRA). Each of these is an impressive collection of tools that provides some very helpful functionalities to the game. They allow you to control the interface to a much greater degree than the basic UI (Figures 2 and 3). For the purposes of this discussion, mods like CTRA also provide extensive help to the organization and management of groups, allowing players easy access to important information about others in the raid and details in any given fight. But what it gives to the raid leader is also powerful.¹⁵ I was alerted to this one day while running the Molten Core instance with my guild. Someone happened to wander a bit too close to a nearby mob, thereby drawing them to our entire group and nearly killing us all. Once we had killed off the creature and gotten back in formation, the raid leader said,

Figure 2
Standard Interface for a 10-Person Raid With No Mods



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

somewhat severely on our Ventrillo voice chat channel, “I am going to be watching his [the next monster’s] target and if I see one of you agro him you are getting minus DKP [dragon kill points, a cumulative reward system guilds often use].”¹⁶ I was fairly new to using CTRA at the time and had not quite thought through the implications of the tool and how much it allowed us to watch each other and be watched. Even though I had not been the one to attract the last monster I immediately felt a knot in my stomach. It was almost as if I had done something wrong already. It was not just that suddenly my experience of the encounter became one in which there was no room for error but that I was somehow being scrutinized (or at least potentially so) in a way I had not anticipated. Without the “view target’s target” function, figuring out who may be in error in such a situation is much less precise, possibly unknowable in any concrete way. But this tool was allowing our leader to watch, at a very micro level, each of our performances. Certainly other guilds are more forgiving to how they handle things, and I do not want to claim that this attitude is ubiquitous. Many guilds act

Figure 3
Typical Raid User Interface (UI) Using Mods



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

much more playfully and casually. I do however want to point out the ways that these tools can not only foster and support this kind of approach but may under the right circumstances evoke it. Within some contexts, such tools become powerful social actors worth taking a closer look at.

At its heart, CTRA is very much a surveillance tool. Leaders can issue commands to review how much damage players have taken to their armor and what they are carrying in their bags. It is difficult to use the notion of surveillance in this context without automatically triggering an implicit negative connotation. Because of their incredible usefulness in facilitating play, we need to shade our understanding of surveillance a bit and consider the ways players readily adopt and enjoy what these tools afford. I have spent some time interviewing high-end raid leaders, and there is near universal consensus that this is an invaluable tool for the execution of high-end raids that require significant coordination and cooperation. In fact, Tucker Smedes, one of the mod's developers, is himself a high-end guild leader, and the production of the tool has been directly tied to his experience of the difficult work involved in leading these

events. He noted what I have heard from many, that “The amount of time I’m able to save using various commands and setups makes my ‘job’ much easier as a raid leader” (personal communication, March 11, 2006). The use of things like damage meters and co/surveillance tools must also be considered within the specific context of gameplay. Most computer games (especially MMOGs) involve the system monitoring, quantifying, and ranking the player’s progress. Indeed, some suggest that computer games are in large part always about disciplining players into particular modes (Garite, 2003). In that regard, these functions speak a familiar language and therefore may call for a less normative critique.

But what happens when additional layers to play—in the case of mods, which are not only user created but may be deployed unevenly—become grafted onto given systems? Does the member of the group who has no damage meter stand on the same footing as the one who does? Where does the player who chooses not to install something like CT fall? I want to juxtapose the common language of emergence and productive engagement with game systems—which I think often carries with it an implied notion of positive and “freeing” interaction—with the development by players of tools that stratify, surveil, quantify, and regulate their fellow gamers.¹⁷ There is a bit of a double-edged sword to these tools (something I think guilds often acknowledge with the ways they moderate use). On one hand, they assist play and even make group coordination better. Yet through their rationalization and quantification of action, they also strongly inform (and potentially limit) what is seen as “good play” or what is viewed as reasonable.¹⁸ In this regard, I am also particularly interested in the ways these tools dynamically shape our understanding of what is thought possible and playful within a game system. There is a complex relationship between the development of a tool and how it alters our notions of what we can and should do. In the case of things like CTRA, high-end encounters come to be seen as nearly undoable without it, and indeed all of the high-end guilds I have encountered require players to use the mod if they join. Because these tools have been refined through repeated use and iterative development, they are widely adopted and act as strong normative agents.

When thinking about the ways these technical objects work, I was reminded of the powergamers I previously interviewed and began to wonder if in fact these functions are mainstreaming the focus on quantification in that play style. In my work with powergamers I saw them as inhabiting a space that might at the surface appear contradictory to some—the pleasures of instrumental and (hyper) rationalized play. In EQ this style was only one of which many players could hold, even at the high end of the game. But if the adoption of these tools and with it the play styles it brings becomes mandatory, must we start to deal more concretely with notions of emergent coercive systems?

Using the language of coercion must be done cautiously within computer games given they are always already forcing particular choices and indeed that “coercion” is not antithetical to pleasure and play. It is certainly also the case that what we might think of as “soft” social coercion is always present and doing work to normalize players. And

as we have seen, some of the tools are powerful assistants for high-end play that gamers willingly and happily adopt. But because mod use emerges organically within the community, we need to turn to those moments in which all players are confronted with this new tool and how they deal with it. Can players opt out of using something like CTRA? Yes, but that typically means opting out of the raiding guilds and thus the high-end content entirely. The tools and the way they script encounters have become so normalized that choosing to not participate in that system is a strong signal. We can also consider the ways these objects circulate in diverse contexts and among diverse players. In many ways, the “world” of Warcraft is not one single space open to all, and the play within it is fairly divergent. If we think of some of these mods as high-performance tools, we can see how they at times uneasily intersect “average” players. Norms produced within raiding guilds sometimes get exported out to nonguild/nonraid encounters. For example, when the high-end player joins a pick-up group they bring with them not only the experience and training gained from their play but the interface that supports it. There can then be quite different norms and expectations at work. And indeed the technological artifacts each player is dealing with shape their experience of that play session.¹⁹ This is a story then not simply of how forms of control and normalization emerge within player culture (that we have seen before in many other games) but the complex role our technical artifacts can have in the construction of such. Things like user-produced mods are sociotechnical actors and are always involved in reshaping the game space—and indeed what play is—in powerful ways.

The final thread I want to pursue briefly in this consideration of emergence speaks to this dynamic of malleability and what happens when our mods start to alter how we understand play. There at times seems to be an uneasy relationship with all these add-ons and what constitutes legitimate action in the game world.²⁰ The line between simply improving the UI and cheating or creating unfair advantage can be tricky. Blizzard (2006b) itself nodded to this in its “Exploitation Policy FAQ” where it stated,

We definitely want people to create their own UIs utilizing custom menu configurations, graphics, and even sounds. Anything that can be coded to modify the style and the look of the UI is fair game, as long as the modifications are done to the sanctioned internal files of the game. However, anything done to the UI to gain any sort of an unfair advantage over other players is unacceptable.

The developer community is certainly aware of the balancing act on this line. As Tucker Smedes (personal communication, March 11, 2006) noted of their work,

CTRA as I said is one of the most used mods in all of *World of Warcraft*, so we’ve tried to ensure that the functionality is in place to make raids more enjoyable. Raiding can be stressful and tiresome, and we try to alleviate some of that stress by assisting the player. We’ve avoided using any code that will basically play for the user, but we try to do what we can that allows players to feel like things are smoother with CTRA in use.

But certainly having a mod that allows you to see precisely when your spells are fading when in combat against a player who may not have the same abilities constitutes some kind of advantage. And the guild that relies on the admittedly useful timers that come with CTRA for various high-end bosses has a better hope of defeating them than the guild that knows with much less precision when events will occur. As with my discussion of nationalism, my point is not to enter into a thorny discussion of cheating or advocate for Blizzard to take any particular action. I primarily want to highlight the ways these player-produced artifacts force participants to confront their own categories of fair play and indeed may even shift them at times. Rather than just seeing these mods as simply functional overlays, they should instead be viewed as strong agents in reshaping what constitutes the game and legitimate play. And as sociotechnical actors, they are part of an ongoing dialogue within the community (of designers and players) about how the game is changing over time.

Conclusion

My goal with this article is to try and situate a larger conversation about emergence and virtual worlds within the specific context of World of Warcraft. By looking at things like national identity, age, and the mod scene, I hope to articulate the decidedly messy nature of game culture as it is lived in any particular space. Emergence should not be simply equated with the utopic or nonhierarchical and is more a process than an outcome. As we can see from this brief case study, systems of stratification and control can arise from the bottom up and be strongly implemented in even player-produced modifications.

I also hope to have highlighted that we need even more case studies before we settle on any major lessons this genre brings us. For myself, I have found the move to both a European and PvP context incredibly illuminating. The ways WoW provides a particular set of technological affordances and intervention possibilities for players in turn brings a host of critical questions relevant to not only game space but our consideration of sociotechnical artifacts. Rather than be disheartened by or dismissive of the shifting landscape of MMOGs, we should embrace the partial stories, the partial truths we are finding in the collection of work that continues to emerge in the field.

Notes

1. This was not because there were only Americans playing on my EverQuest (EQ) server. Indeed, because EQ did not do the same kind of regional server segregation that World of Warcraft (WoW) does (e.g., if you buy your copy of WoW in the United States, you are directed to only U.S. servers), you often encountered people from other countries within the game.

2. As I was finishing this article I saw yet another reprimand in the general chat channel of Ogrimmar against a Swedish speaker. On a bit of a whim I sent a private message to the person who had threatened to

report the “offense” to a game manager and noted to them that actually, non-English was allowed in the game. They replied that no it wasn’t, at which point I gave them the URL for the statement I quote here. After a few moments pause they came back and typed the smiley “:-O”—which I interpreted to be a kind of “Oh, what do you know!” They then noted that “well, it is recommended.” We chatted a bit more as I was curious where they had gotten the idea it was a formal rule. Sure enough, in a kind of “telephone game,” they had heard of this “rule” from seeing someone else reprimanding a player in public. At one point in the conversation they made a grammatical error that prompted me to inquire if they were themselves a native English speaker. They weren’t. This turned out to be, interestingly, a Swedish player policing a fellow Swedish player.

3. I have given the guild a pseudonym.

4. Very few note with much care all those players who are buying the goods the real-money trade market is producing.

5. Henry Lowood (personal communication, May 3, 2006) noted that there is a similar longstanding tension and set of negotiations around national and ethnic identity on BNet, so we are well reminded that these issues have not just appeared with massively multiplayer online games.

6. Indeed, this is the same reasoning often offered for why it is simultaneously compelling for a much more casual audience as well.

7. Both WoW and EQ at least formally prohibit minors from playing without the permission of a parent.

8. Mikael Jakobsson (personal communication, 2006) wisely noted that I don’t know what the kids think about this dynamic, and indeed, they may even feel WoW is more “their game” than something like EQ was. This line of inquiry would make a great study, and more cross-generational work from these spaces needs to be done.

9. See Rhody (2003) for a fascinating discussion on Asheron’s Call and the use of player mods.

10. There are also healing meters that act similarly, calculating how much healing a person is doing.

11. For some players, healing meters are the offset, but again, as anyone who has done a complicated raid (especially those that lead them) knows, actual damage and healing are only two components for overall success.

12. Mark Poster (1990) argued “that structure and grammar of the database *creates* relationships among pieces of information that do not exist in those relationships outside of the database” (p. 96). I find this particularly compelling in that it suggests the generative power of systems in not only providing data but formulating particular associations and sets of meanings for it.

13. It is not just that individual player action is cataloged, but it becomes aggregated. So for example, mods like Auctioneer or Enchantrix take small data points (how much an item sold for or what it disenchanting to) and feed the info back into the game for players to then use. There is discussion in the literature of the notion of “surveillant assemblages,” and in many ways the collections we see operating in the game seem to evoke that language (for more on this idea, see Haggerty & Ericson, 2000; Hier, 2003).

14. There is actually a fourth position to be taken, that of *sousveillance*, a term coined by Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003) to describe instances in which people watch those above them (*sous* being the French word for below and *veillance* for watch). In this case, we could discuss a guild member watching the raid leader’s position on the damage meter as one form of *sousveillance*.

15. Analysis of these tools requires a shift from a purely individual frame (what it affords a player) to one that takes into account group affordances.

16. For those familiar with the Mordot.com site and the now somewhat infamous recording of the raid leader berating his group for agroing the whelps in Onyxia, this description is all too familiar and probably happens more than we expect.

17. Surveillance techniques in WoW extend beyond what players implement to assist their gaming sessions. Blizzard itself makes constant and covert use of tools that allow it to watch for people trying to hack the system. Its anticheat FAQ notes its use of a utility that scans the computer’s random access memory and watches for “unauthorized third party programs or computer code [that] has been attached to the *World of Warcraft* process” (Blizzard, 2006a). And on the scholarly side, the PlayOn Project at

XeroxPARC deploys extensive data-mining techniques for its social science research on player communities within the game (<http://blogs.parc.com/playon/>). Piggybacking on the same open structure the rest of the mod dev community uses, they gather data on everything from how many players are in guilds to how frequently they play. I find Ien Ang's (2000) discussion of the "innovations" (and limitations) for measuring television audiences is provocative if shifted to the game context. In the same way he suggested the act of "watching television" not a neatly contained moment that can be easily measured, I wonder if we might say the same of playing computer games (and of socializing in them).

18. This can be seen most dramatically in the ways high-end encounters have now become so scripted—indeed to the degree that mods may automate many functions previously held by players such as calling out timed actions—that they normalize particular forms of play and action such that alternate modes appear not only unthinkable but downright stupid to many players.

19. Although this is often not a problem, sometimes high-end players in pick-up groups can feel things are going too slow or their mods let them see (and critique) their fellow players' performance in particular ways. I think there is a fairly common trend at the high end for players to operate in smaller and smaller social spheres—where grouping outside of one's guild or with players of a less accomplished rank (often informally noted by guild tags) is done infrequently. In many ways, progressing in the game is about moving up through levels of stratification that are not only formally built into the system (via levels) but emerge around skill (how good a player you are; i.e., not all level 60s are as accomplished as the each other) and social status (which guild you belong to and how it is seen in the community).

20. This is not an unfamiliar issue as Pargman (2000) noted it as well in the world of text-based multi-user dungeons.

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