
Searching through a Game

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As you read this, an epidemic of momentous proportions is quickly spreading across our planet. Alarmingly, this dreadful disease is highly contagious; I myself had a bout with this ailment and just barely managed to come out alive. It has the power to completely alter one's life within mere days, leaving little chance of recovery. I am talking, of course, about the recent outbreak of MMORPGs, or Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with this concept, a MMORPG is an online game where millions of people use their computers to access a fantasy world in which they have a personalized character who they use to do battle, complete quests, attain virtual fortune, and ultimately become more powerful. Sounds like your standard nerd attraction, right? Surprisingly however, something about these games makes them appeal to all walks of life. Granted, there still exists a heavy "nerd" fan base, but strangely enough, you are just as likely to run into a businessman, a frat guy, or even a college professor as you are to run into a stereotypical nerd in the majority of these games.

But what's wrong with a little entertainment here and there? Well, unfortunately, for some enigmatic reason, MMORPGs are frighteningly addictive. The most popular of these games, *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, is often referred to as *World of Warcrack* because of its uncanny ability to suck a person in with merely one use. If only this comparison were true. No, *WoW* is much more potent. With currently over 12 million monthly subscribers, this single MMORPG is six times more popular than actual crack cocaine ("Drug Statistics").

The ramifications of their addictive nature then become inevitable. For students who play these games, a sharp decline in GPA is almost instantly noticeable. In fact, one of the heads of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, Deborah Tate, actually stated that online game addiction is "one of the top reasons for college drop-outs" (Tate). But, for adults, the repercussions can be even worse. Not only are there many cases where socially functional middle-aged people lose their jobs due to a gaming habit, there have also been several reported cases of deaths caused by nonstop gaming, including the death of a South Korean man who died in an Internet café after 50 straight hours of playing *Starcraft*, a *Warcraft* spinoff (Griffiths). I myself have personally seen the damage these games can cause. I've recently had the heartbreaking experience of speaking with someone who had just gotten a divorce because his wife couldn't take his virtual habit any more. Remarkably, he still plays the same game today.

At this point, let me elaborate a bit more on what these people are doing for the countless hours spent playing these games. I have played several of these MMOs, and the one that most clearly defines them all is the infamous *Warcrack*. When you first start your adventure, you create a character with an array of customizable features, or a new you, per se. For the first stage of the game, your general objective is to gain levels, which increase your power, wealth, and status. Your

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character gains levels through experience, which is gathered by killing monsters and other players, or by questing (helping non-player characters with specific tasks). The leveling process is the first addicting facet of MMORPGs. In order to obtain the best gear in these games, you have to team up with other people and spend an unbelievably long amount of time killing harder monsters. In *Warcraft*, there are *guilds*, which are collections of people who work together in the game and who essentially become in-game families.

Since this game genre's arrival, countless people have speculated over what causes its addictiveness and popularity. The main argument that has been made is that these millions of people who play these games are all trying to "escape reality." On the surface, this claim seems very accurate, for these games allow us to immerse ourselves into a completely new world—a new reality. It would make sense that, with all the hardships that people currently face because of our society, users would be seeking an escape more than ever. But, to be quite honest, this could not be further away from the truth.

In actuality, all the hardships, conflicts, and pain that are created from our normal social interactions and structure are recreated within these games. When users first start playing, they are looked down upon, and actually made fun of for being "Noobs," or players with little knowledge or skill in regards to the game. This is still the case even when players reach the level cap. Then, they might manage to get some better gear and they themselves start putting down other, less experienced players. That is, until they join a guild. They then become friendly with certain players within the guild, thus creating cliques.

The fact that we recreate society in MMOs opens a window that shows us just how similar these games are to real life. And, just like real life, there is that one inevitable aspect of human

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nature that is behind every single thing we do: simply put, it is our persistent search to attain a feeling of completeness that motivates us to try to "improve" ourselves in every aspect of life. It's what motivates us to seek higher learning; it's what motivates us to get a job; it's what we try to acquire through religion. We feel that if we truly belong or progress through these establishments, we will be complete, and in being so, be perpetually happy. These games are so riveting, so impossible to stop playing, because, unlike real life, we are able to tangibly measure our progress toward what we subconsciously think will be our completeness. With every level, we temporarily feel as if a part of us has come into being—as if we are one step closer towards self-realization. Sadly, however, the feeling never truly comes.

Some are quicker to realize this than others. A player that has literally reached the pinnacle of perfection in one of these games might feel content for all of ten minutes. Once the feeling wears off, however—and, trust me, it does—he will find himself as empty as before, if not emptier. Some players will stop right there and count their losses. However, the mass majority of them do not. They will continue playing these games, forever searching for that final level—that completing piece. But it doesn't exist.

It doesn't exist in the game, just as it doesn't exist physically in real life. With all the knowledge in the world, one could still feel empty; with all the money in the world, one could still feel empty; even with all the love in the world, one could still feel that inherently human emptiness. But that is precisely what it is—a *human* emptiness. No other species on this planet has that same desire to fulfill one's self. Maybe that is what makes us human, what makes us so unique and different from every other known life form. Maybe this search for completion is what has made us so "successful" as a species—what has made us develop new technologies, new ways of understanding the universe and our place in it. At the same time, maybe we would be better off

living our lives in ignorant bliss, without this eternal burden to carry. But, perhaps, there is an alternative; perhaps we can do both:

In oneself lies the whole world and if you know how to look and learn, the door is there and the key is in your hand. Nobody and nothing on earth can give you either the key or the door to open, except yourself.—Krishnamurti

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