



MSc in New Media, Information and Society

Other dissertations of the series are a

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Massively multiplayer online games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* are played by millions of people around the world, and their use is growing. Much has been written about MMORPGs, including studies of children and families who play these games, and about the implications of these games on social capital. However, as yet, few studies have combined research on MMORPGs, family play and social capital, to see if MMORPGs are incorporated into family life, and if they affect socialization in families. This paper focuses on how the game *World of Warcraft* is being played by three families, and explores if and how this collaborative play increases intra-family socialization and social capital. The research outlined below shows that these games could be used as a way to increase family bonds, depending on existing family social capital and on how the game is used by the family. However, this is not a given, and the ways these games are used by families evolve over time as family relationships and the games themselves evolve.

Early in my master's studies, I was introduced to a massive multiplayer online game, *World of Warcraft* (WoW), by Tim and Rose Barnes, a husband and wife who play the game together. WoW is a fantasy-based online computer game in which players interact in real time. Having never played this kind of game, I was intrigued to learn about their friends the Smiths, a family in which multiple generations, including children, parents and grandparents, play WoW together. I also met Phil and Kyle Jones, a father and son who play the game as part of the same group as the Barnes and Smith families.

I saw that these families had integrated *World of Warcraft* into their lives as a mechanism for family interaction, and I decided to study this game, not as games are usually studied, in terms of addiction or media effects (Kelly, 2004; Taylor, 2006a), but through the framework of "Everyday life," including concj 45 0 0 45 1425 0 Tm (n) 9/Cs1 cs 00 0 sc q

children's and parent's interest in going online [including playing games] together will predictably wane" (ibid: 241).

This is in contrast to Squire (2002), Sotamaa (2005), and examples in McKenna and Bargh (1999), Bakardjieva (2005), Taylor (2006a), and even Turkle (1995), who argue that MMORPGs are designed to be social. "It is common for WoW players to play with offline friends and family" (Nardi and Harris, 2006: 5). Steinkuehler and Williams (2006: 904) note, "to argue that MMO game play is isolated and passive media

the game space through pre-existing relationships," (ibid: 53). Kelly (2004: 9) argues that an MMORPG "isn't a game at all" but a vast social space, designed to facilitate social interaction

2006). With all this

electronic interaction does not facilitate this kind of social talk, but, as can be seen in Kelly (2004), Castronova (2005a), Nardi and Harris (2006) and Taylor (2006a), social talk is a persistent and defining characteristic of MMORPGs. "WoW joins a long tradition of card and board games in which family and friends of different ages and genders may play together" (Nardi and Harris, 2006: 10); WoW may therefore be the "schmoozable" activity which Putnam (2000: 105) argues is needed to foster social capital in modern society. This study sets out to explore MMORPGs, family and social capital further and provide some insights on if (and if so, how) games might be part of social capital building inside the family.

Could (and if so, in what ways) MMORPGs be part of daily family interaction? What implication does this have

The continually “changing context of games-playing” (Haddon, 1999: 322) makes it difficult to choose a research method when studying games such as *World of Warcraft*. Consalvo and Dutton (2006: 2) note that there is a lack of clear methodology in most studies of games, “other than the assumption that they were played and carefully thought about by the author.” I wanted to ensure that my study did not suffer from this lack of methodolog

Frankel and Siang (1999: 14) note the need to ensure that “subjects are selected for reasons directly related to the problem being studied instead of their easy availability.” The impetus for this research was the discovery, through my informants, of families who played WoW together.

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2006). As Nardi says, "they are very busy running a successful company and don't think they need research," (Nardi, personal communication, 13 July 2007). Ideally, I would have obtained their permission and engaged with them about this research.

Could spend a whole evening and not talk to each other....now they're in the same world. They do talk more....they have more arguments, but....[they're] spending time together as a unit, rather than two, two separate units. So it's done them a world of good....they communicate, all the time.

Charlie echoed Ted's assessment, noting that he and Sandra often play "of an evening....doing something together" instead of her

Haddon (2004: 63) argues that telephone conversations often do not help grandparents connect with grandchildren, largely because they have few shared topics of conversation. However, For Charlie and Sandra, the game gave them not only a means of communication with their grandsons, but also provided this common interest. As Bonnie noted to Sandra, "it gives you that extra thing in common, doesn't it, with the kids?" saying, "the kids have always got something to talk to their grandparents about." While the boys

about whether ICTs (including Internet-based media) help or hinder social capital (Putnam, 2000; Katz and Rice, 2002; Kraut et al, 2002) it appears that MMORPGs *co*

Rose noted that she enjoys playin


guild and set up a new guild for a core group: the people they “count as friends” inside and outside the game. They also cancelled the Ventrilo account.

Although Bonnie thinks her family is “unique for the amount of generations” playing WoW, she knows other families who play; within the Kings and Queens guild, at least three families play together. Therefore, although not yet widely studied (see Nardi and Harris, 2006; Williams, et al, 2006 for early forays), family gaming could be occurring with some regularity. Each of my families had high levels of social capital before starting to play WoW. The families spent time together outside of WoW, including playing offline games. The parents were obviously proud of their children, and the children were fond of their parents. As Will and Pete’s responses demonstrate, the game does not always improve intra-family bonding, but I argue that the frustration the boys showed with their parents is normal; it is as much a reflection on their attitudes as teenagers as on the game. Charlie and Sandra’s comments show that WoW allowed them to forge a relationship that

with the same interpersonal issues as other forms of communication. The game provides opportunities for socialisation, but the outcome of those opportunities depends on the people playing the game rather than on the game itself.

This study is not representative or generalizable to all families who play MMORPGs, but, without being overly optimistic, it does lead one to wonder if, in a world in which more and more interaction takes place over computers and phone lines, these games could, *depending on how they are used on an everyday basis*, provide a means for enhancing family bonds. Whether positive or negative, playing WoW was implicated in the ways that family members negotiated their relationships with each other; it became part of Hirsch's (1992) moral economy of the family.

Kraut, et al,

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First time playing the game. It is a visually/sensory rich environment which requires players to internalize many skills (even just moving around) before play becomes ingrained – before one can focus on play rather than on skill acquisition – before “playing” becomes second nature. In short, it requires significant time and cognitive commitments. It also raises moral issues. For example, as a hunter (a type of character class), I can use a gun. However, I am opposed to guns in real life, so I choose not to have one in the game. Another moral issue – I tried to help an NPC (non-player character) as part of a quest, but because I did not have good command of the controls, I used the wrong key and ended up killing it instead of helping it. I felt guilty at doing so, despite the

walking together or mutual TV viewing – lots of casual conversation sparked by what one is seeing in front of one's char, but then that moves the conversation into the more personal or interactional realm. It is not "cocktail party" chat – more like chat at a dinner party of old friends.

My spouse also plays the game. He has the same reaction to social interaction in game play as he does to social interaction in real life. He wants largely to be left alone, but when pushed or pulled he will go into a social group situation and often finds this rewarding. He is used to being the quiet one in the group who has to be brought into the conversation, especially in a group where he does not know everyone well. He finds the social somewhat intimidating. In this case, he does not want to play collaboratively, preferring to play alone until he feels he has a grasp of how game play works. But he is pulled into groups by our friends in the game, and feels he should be social and play in groups. He enjoys and finds it frustrating, as he would while being shown any new skill by a good friend in front of whom you do not want to appear stupid.

I was helped by two of the guild officers, including the guild master, after they killed the boss I was stalking. I had killed all his minions and had turned to engage him when I realized he was dead. I mentioned this over Ventrilo jokingly, and then heard Ted say, "Where are you?" I replied, and he and Bonnie broke into laughter, as they were the ones who had "stolen my kill". We all had a great laugh about it and then they helped me kill him and complete my quest. I saw that they (their chars) were very powerful – killing things as we went along. I tried to say goodbye, but misspelled as I tried to type quickly in game, and missed it. I apologized on Ventrilo.

I would not have been able to have this interaction if not for Ventrilo. I would not have typed out my feelings about the boss having been killed, but I did feel I could mention it in voice. Ventrilo enhances socialization much more than if we were just typing. It is not part of the game, but has been added for just this reason

At times, I find this sociability a bit intimidating – do I want to socialize at night when I am tired and have been dealing with people all day? However, I feel socially obligated to go online, as my absence will be noted if I stay away. I feel especially obligated to keep up my social capital

I feel I need time in the game to play with others and learn from them about what to do. I need time to make use of that knowledge – either alone or in small groups with them, so that I don't feel lost and stupid in front of others I don't know well. I feel intimidated by level 70s who can do so much more and so much more quickly than I can. I feel I slow I

Today I watched Rose and Tim play together. Her character needed to do a group quest (at a higher level than my character) so he went with her to assist. They play very well together (having done so for over a year), coordinating in a way that seems to come from this long experience of playing together. Each seems to anticipate what the other will do. They also seem to enjoy playing together – it's a way to spend a Saturday afternoon with each other (and with us, as we can enjoy watching them play for a bit). It's sort of like playing cards or a board game together, but instead we're all playing a computer game together. I also sense that Tim likes helping out and being able to share his skill and knowledge of the game.

They also share expressions of love (or annoyance if one does something that isn't exactly what the other wanted) easily. In this case, they are also co-located, 45 802 0. 45 0 002- t

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Husband:

- Tim Barnes

Wife:

- Rose Barnes

Grandparents:

- Charlie Smith

How did you get invo

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TED: So it's more economical for me to actually use Ventrilo.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: And, obviously it's a benefit for the guild.

INTERVIEWER: So,

TED: But we actually lost – Ventrilo went down a couple of weeks ago,

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: They were moving servers and things,

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: Um, updating – oh, god, was the guild lost! (Laughs)

INTERVIEWER: I logged on, and I was like, "there's no Vent! What, what do I do?"

TED: (laughs) the guild was lost! "Oh we can't talk" And you can't, you can go in instances, but to progress through that instance quickly, is very, very

INTERVIEWER: yeah

TED: You can't do it without – you rely on the voice communication system.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: And, um, it's got to be done.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I – it was very weird, I have to say, when I logged on I was like

TED: Playing the game without someone yakking to you

INTERVIEWER: yeah

TED: Ah – You gotta have communication, and, um, I – you do tend to rely on it. You know, it's – whether you're

real life, any I've met so far have come across as much similar to the actual characters they play, or

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: the voices and they – their actions and things are very, very familiar to actually their real life.

INTERVIEWER: So you feel like, if you're internal a

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah

TED: are quite genuine people. Um, and the age group is completely, you know, upward from 14 years old to

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: 70, you know. Um, I don't think – the game is playable for all ages, and it's, it's an active game, it keeps your mind thinking. It does keep you alert. Um, which I, I think it helps in certain situations. Our next-door neighbour has a learning difficulty. And it was recommended that she play an online game, to help her coordination and interaction with other people.

INTERVIEWER: I asked Bonnie this as well, while we were talking about things and it sort of – 'cause she said similar things, sort of, that being in the game helped with socialization

TED: yup

INTERVIEWER: and social skills and stuff. Do you see that in your own kids as well?

TED: Brian is very quiet and Will, Will also - in real life Will's a lot quieter than he is in game. He's – if he's in a crowd of people he knows, he's fine. If he's in a crowd of people who are strangers to him, he's not so open andm (1) Tj 45 0 0 45 173 0 6

INTERVIEWER: Right

TED: It's like playing the game on me own. You might be in the same house playing the game, but you're not actually with your partner.

INTERVIEWER: Right

TED: The same as, you're down the pub, you're not with your partner. You are involved in a different community. And your wife or partner is an outsider to that community.

INTERVIEWER: Right

TED: She might come down the pub now and again with you, she might come and play the game now and again with you, but that's just like a night out as a couple, playing the game as a couple or socializing down the pub as a couple. So in a way it is the

INTERVIEWER: (laughs) names

TED: in fun. You know, um, but I think, if we were in different rooms,

TED: Oh, as you'll have noticed

INTERVIEWER: I have.

TED: Brian, Brian is aspiring to be that person.

INTERVIEWER: (laughs)

TED: He wants to be – he doesn't know how to be quite so loud, and he's a little bit quieter, obviously he's younger, um, and he'll grow out of that, obviously he's a bit self-conscious. [Section deleted as divulges some personal information and is not relevant]

INTERVIEWER: Yup

TED: Pete was exactly the same. Same as Will. [Section deleted as divulges some personal information and is not relevant] But Will, he – he's a great communicator, and he needs to actually bring that into real life rather than in game. He can talk to people, he can communicate, he can explain, he can lead people. In real life, he's got that

TED: You know, and it – I let people get on with their lives, with a guiding hand where the kids are involved, obviously. You know, you try and steer them the way you can, whether it's in life or in game, you know. There's things in game I see Pete doing which I wouldn't expect him to do in life so I wouldn't expect him to do in game. You know, he'll call somebody this, the other, "Pete, you don't do it to your next door neighbour, you not going to do it to them." You've got to respect people for who they are not, you know, so ...

INTERVIEWER: So there's an opportunity to use that as a teaching tool for him.

TED: Yeah. With them – it's – they all love it. But they'll play other things. I won't ma

TED: Put it right, it's your computer. I've guided them along the way, I've showed them so, they've got more of a respect for the machines as well, because, they're, they're not fragile, but in some respects they are. You've got to be careful with them.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

TED: And if you don't plug it in right, it's not going to work. The same with the car or anything else, so it has helpe

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Benefits of the research: This research will examine how families play World of Warcraft together.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which my parents and I may keep.

If I or my parents have any questions about the conduct of the research project, we may contact the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science. More information can be found at:

<http://www>



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