Chapter 4
Addiction in World of Warcraft:
A Virtual Ethnography Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an investigation in determining whether players are addicted, or show signs of addiction, to the Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft. Criteria to ascertain addiction in World of Warcraft players were developed based on well-documented theories in the area. A questionnaire was used in order to obtain data for analysis. This was distributed to a population of World of Warcraft players by use of advertisement on guild websites and on the official game forum. The results of the questionnaire show that 11.86% (n=21) of respondents matched the developed criteria of addiction in World of Warcraft. These respondents are considered to be addicted or are at "High Risk" of being addicted. This figure is confirmed by other studies of addiction levels in MMORPGs undertaken by existing research.

INTRODUCTION

With more than 11.5 million subscribers worldwide, Blizzard's World of Warcraft (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2009a) is by far the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) to date. The second expansion to the game, 'Wrath of the Lich King', sold over 2.8 million copies within the first 24 hours and went on to sell 4 million in the first month, making it the fastest selling PC game of all time and setting a new record for monthly PC game sales. Both records were previously held by the first expansion to WoW, 'The Burning Crusade'. With such a large subscriber base, a monthly subscription fee and the ability to sell expansions to the original game offering even more content and therefore generating extra income, the creators of WoW, Blizzard Entertainment, know that "the more people who play, the more they pay".

Due to this large player base of highly dedicated enthusiasts, there are bound to be reports of some players who take the game too seriously and their horror stories have appeared in the media. The following are only some of the incidences that have been recorded:

Beijing, China - The parents of a 13-year-old Chinese boy who they say jumped to his death from a tall building after playing one of the popular "World of Warcraft" online games for 36 hours straight are suing its Chinese distributor, a news report said Friday. Zhang Xiaoyi died on 27th December 2004, leaving behind a suicide note saying he wanted "to join the heroes of the game he worshipped," the official Xinhua News Agency reported. (Fox News.com, 2006)

Scott Hamshere, from Bromley, should have been the first person in the UK with a copy of the game (Wrath of Lich King) in November 2008. He had started queuing at 6am and was the first in line. However, as the barriers were lifted, it was all too much, and he collapsed from exhaustion! (BBC News, 2008)

World of Warcraft 'more addictive than cocaine' the game has been called "the most dangerous game on the market" by addiction therapists, after a 15-year-old Swedish boy collapsed and went into convulsions earlier this month (February). (Telegraph.co.uk, 2009)

There are some good news on this front in as much as an eight-bed residential unit has been set up as a treatment centre for video game addicts by Smith & Jones Addiction Consultants. This organization typically treats drug addiction, alcoholism, eating disorders, or other compulsive behaviours. Now it has expanded to include video game addiction. Keith Bakker, the Director of an addiction consultancy in Amsterdam, is quoted in a BBC News article, saying "We saw enormous parallels between problems with gaming and alcohol and gambling." (Kuo, 2006)

Many individuals with similar cases, and mainly the media, have blamed WoW (and its creators) as to why they did the things they did, claiming that they are addicted to the game and are unable to live a normal life. These claims give grounds for an investigation into the relationship between addiction and the online virtual environment of the WoW game to see whether it does in fact have addictive properties.

The article will investigate specific areas, including what WoW is and how it came about, as well as addiction and a means of determining it. Addiction is a hard term to define in our modern-day environment; there are many ways that it can be interpreted with. WoW, being an MMORPG, closely matches the type of addiction referred to as Internet addiction due to its huge social environment and requirement to be online to play. In fact, Internet addiction encompasses MMORPGs as sub-categories. There are two main proposed theories on how to determine if someone is addicted to the Internet, the first being Kimberly Young's Diagnostic Criteria (Young, 1997) and the second being Mark Griffiths' six symptoms of addiction (Griffiths, 1998). These were used to develop criteria that would ascertain addiction in WoW players.

A questionnaire was used in order to obtain data for analysis. Its purpose was to provide a greater understanding of the player's background, gaming habits and demographic information. It also was used to ascertain whether or not players show or have shown signs of being addicted to the game using the developed criteria. The questionnaire was distributed to a population of WoW players by use of an advertisement on guild websites and on the official WoW forum. 176 individuals participated in the experimental study. This data was then analysed and discussed to help further the investigations in the field.

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