

# World of Warcraft as a Ludic Cyborg

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes *World of Warcraft* as a *ludic cyborg* — an entity that exists for play and depends on both artificial and organic components to survive. We argue that the popularity of the game arose due to the balance between the types of socialization it promotes and in-game literacies acquired by players on PvP servers.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0. [Personal computing]: General – Games.

## General Terms

Performance, Human Factors.

## Keywords

Social Interaction, Social Computing, MMORPG, Ludic Cyborg.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is currently the most popular game of the massively multiplayer online RPG (MMORPG) genre, with more than 10 million active players [11].

We attempt to explain the popularity of *World of Warcraft* by describing it as a *ludic cyborg*. In this paper the term *ludic cyborg* refers to an organism of artificial and natural systems existing for play, or *ludus*. The software and hardware supporting the game represent the artificial systems. The players themselves and their in-game actions represent the organic components.

The most important artificial aspects we discuss include the mechanics of server types, the quest system, and the aggro radius. We also discuss player interactions and in-game literacies. Lastly, we present a discussion of the recent Alliance player boycott of the Alterac Valley battleground. We believe this to be the first academic account of the boycott, an important event that can help scholars understand what factors support the popularity of WoW.

Since these observations were made on a specific player versus player (PvP) server, we do not aim to define the experience of *all* WoW players. Hence, while our argument may generalize to PvP servers, it may not to non-PvP servers.

## 2. RELATED WORK

Scholars are already conducting qualitative research to explain the popularity of WoW [7, 4]. Ducheneaut et al. performed a

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*FuturePlay 2008* Toronto, Ontario, Canada. November 3-5 2008.

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quantitative study using WoW's scripting engine to collect character demographics on five servers. Their paper examines the spontaneous temporary groupings which often form when players encounter quests that are too overwhelming to be completed alone. They argue that WoW is effectively a "Massively Single-Player Online Role Playing Game" with the possibility for spontaneous multiplayer interactions [5].

Other work has examined the success of WoW in the context of various game mechanics such as player death [6]. Other work has examined the design of the game world as space [1]. We aim to add to this body of research by describing the success of WoW using the ludic cyborg analogy.

## 3. THE LUDIC CYBORG

### 3.1 Game Server Types

There are four types of game servers in WoW: Normal, player versus player (PvP), role playing (RP), and role playing player versus player (RPPvP). We are particularly interested in PvP interactions, as we believe these are critical to the game's success. Players on PvP servers will initially find themselves in friendly zones. Above level 20, players will eventually have to venture into "contested" areas to progress in the game. Upon entering a contested territory, the player is automatically flagged for PvP combat, allowing any player on the opposing side to attack them. Players who do not desire this type of interaction can instead play on Normal server where the flag for PvP mode can be toggled on and off. RP and RPPvP servers offer the aforementioned types of interaction in addition to role playing. Players on these servers are encouraged to interact "in character" — where the nature of these interactions are generally prescribed by high fantasy literature, within the context of the game's extensive background story.

Previous work noted that the number of Normal servers outnumbered the PvP servers [5]. Nearly two years later, the number of PvP servers has increased drastically to match the number of Normal servers, suggesting increased player interest in this type of interaction [2].

### 3.2 The Quest System

Quests are one type of gameplay in WoW. Quests are accompanied with a background story informing the quest, formal objectives that must be met in order to successfully complete it, and the rewards for its completion. In this dialogue, the player can choose either to accept or decline the quest. If the player accepts, they can choose at any time to complete it or discard it [10]. There is little agency in quest completion since doing so involves "enacting whatever role the game designers devised" [9]. The only challenges quests present are navigation and strategy [10].

The limited number of distinct quest types and lack of agency in quest completion can easily lead to *quest literacy*. Once this literacy is gained, quest narrative becomes transparent, revealing the mechanical nature of questing. The introduction of human-piloted opponents helps to maintain the level of engagement in

*WoW* as it compensates for the predictability associated computer-controlled enemies. The possibility of running into powerful enemy player characters while attempting to complete a quest adds a sense of real danger. While the quest system helps to sustain character development through in-game rewards, it is the PvP element that helps maintains engagement.

### 3.3 The Aggro Radius

Aggro, short for aggravation, refers to the act of acquiring a monster's attention, which is how most NPC fights begin. We argue that PvP interaction also compensates for the predictability associated with the aggro radius in NPCs.

Understanding the "aggro radius" is another type of in-game literacy acquired by players of *WoW*, which arguably, may detract from gameplay. The behaviour of virtual enemies is determined by artificial intelligence, which includes their aggro radius. While the exact formula for determining the radius for NPCs is not known, informal game testing in the community has noted that the aggro radius is observably larger for higher level NPCs in-world, making higher level monsters generally more threatening [12].

When one considers Csikszentmihalyi's theory of Flow [3], the need for the organic becomes apparent. Flow requires a balance between the difficulty of the activity and the abilities of the participant. Once a high level of literacy is achieved, the player may become bored with gameplay. Flow is improved in *WoW* by the addition of human-piloted enemies. The actions of such enemies are not governed by algorithms and AI, but rather, can be truly nondeterministic thanks to human intelligence. The ability for players to switch seamlessly between PvP and PvE type interactions – organic and mechanical – is one of the many qualities we attribute to the game's success.

### 3.4 The Alterac Valley Boycott

Another avenue for PvP interaction in *WoW* are the battlegrounds, which feature a style of play similar to that popularized by competitive first-person shooters such as id Software's *Quake 3 Arena*. Players can join battleground queues by speaking to specific NPCs. Once enough players from each side have joined a queue, players enter the battleground instance and fight to achieve specific objectives (e.g., "Defend/attack the mill", etc.).

Currently there are four battlegrounds in *WoW*: Eye of the Storm, Arathi Basin, Warsong Gulch, and Alterac Valley. The objective in each battleground varies. In Alterac Valley, players must defeat the enemy NPC general and attempt to wipe out the enemy reinforcements. Players who participate in battlegrounds are able to acquire honor points for their contributions to their cause.

Blizzard often adjusts game mechanics through regular patches. A patch released in November 2007, introduced changes to the Alterac Valley battleground widely believed to drastically favour the Horde. This prompted a boycott by Alliance players. Because so few Alliance players joined the battleground, the average wait times for Horde players rose to as high as 56 minutes [8].

Players of both sides noted how quickly the Alliance boycott of Alterac Valley got the attention of the publisher. The release of another patch in January 2008 supposedly addressed Alliance concerns [13]. This boycott is the most compelling illustration of

World of Warcraft as a ludic cyborg. Lack of Alliance participation in the Alterac Valley battleground directly affected Horde participation and prompted a change in the game's mechanics.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed World of Warcraft as a ludic cyborg; an organism of artificial and natural systems where balance must be maintained in order to facilitate *ludus*. We conclude that while the mechanics of *WoW* are important, it is the introduction of human-piloted enemies that helps to maintain the level of engagement in *World of Warcraft* once various literacy curves are overcome.

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