

# Chapter V

## Collective Solitude and Social Networks in World of Warcraft\*

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter investigates the nature and structure of social networks formed between the players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), an incredibly popular form of Internet-based entertainment attracting millions of subscribers. To do so, we use data collected about the behavior of more than 300,000 characters in World of Warcraft (the most popular MMOG in America). We show that these social networks are often sparse and that most players spend time in the game experiencing a form of “collective solitude”: they play surrounded by, but not necessarily with, other players. We also show that the most successful player groups are analogous to the organic, team-based forms of organization that are prevalent in today’s workplace. Based on these findings, we discuss the relationship between online social networks and “real-world” behavior in organizations in more depth.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online gaming has become a phenomenon of growing social, cultural, and economic importance. From the pioneering, text-only MUDs of the 1990s (Curtis, 1992; Cuciz, 2001) to today’s

rich, graphical 3-D environments, the market has grown to more than 13 million players (Woodcock, 2005) and generated revenues of more than 5 billion dollars in 2007. Growth is still considerable and estimated at about 25% per year for the foreseeable future (Olausson, 2007).

*Figure 1. A night elf priest riding his mount*



One behemoth stands out among all these lucrative massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs): World of Warcraft (WoW). As of today, more than 8 millions subscribers worldwide (Blizzard, 2007) are interacting, competing, and collaborating in WoW's online world. WoW was designed around a template broadly similar to other games in the same genre, itself inspired by the more traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons (Fine, 1983). Like its predecessors, the game takes place in a persistent universe where there is no clear beginning and end and no set schedule. To enter the game players first create one or several "avatars" from a set of classes (e.g., magician, warrior) and races (e.g., night elves, orcs) as digital representations of themselves. Once this character is created, players can begin questing in a medieval-fantasy world broadly inspired from the works of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien.

Azeroth (the world of WoW) is an extremely vast and richly detailed 3-D environment (see Figure 1). Players can fight dangerous creatures (which may include other players) and explore the game's two continents alone or in the company of others while undertaking quests. This allows them to earn "experience points" and reach progres-

sively higher "levels" (60 was the maximum at the time of our analyses<sup>1</sup>), improving the abilities of their character and acquiring powerful items along the way.

Like its predecessors in the same genre, WoW is highly collaborative by design (Taylor, 2006): players often have to band together to accomplish the game's objectives, and trading items and information is essential to a player's advancement (Nardi & Harris, 2006). While some player groups can be short-lived (e.g., ad-hoc "pick up groups" formed by strangers to accomplish a difficult quest, and disbanded afterwards), many crystallize into more stable social networks of various size and complexity. The need for repeated collaboration in online games therefore translates into formal, persistent groups that are supported out-of-the box by nearly all MMOGs: guilds (Figure 2).

Guilds are essential elements in the social life of online gaming communities. They frame a player's experience (Seay, Jerome, Lee, & Kraut, 2004) by providing a stable social backdrop to many game activities, and their members tend to group with others more often and play longer than non-affiliated players (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006a). At the "endgame" (when players have reached level 60 and cannot

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