Chapter 96
Digital Structures and the Future of Online Leadership

Moses Wolfenstein
University of Wisconsin – Extension, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses findings from a study that looked at organizational leadership in the massively multiplayer online game World of Warcraft® in an attempt to inform the future of leadership in schools and other online and blended learning organizations. After offering a general orientation to the game world and the original study, this chapter delineates the ways in which studying virtual worlds of this sort can and cannot inform theory and practice of instructional leadership. It then examines the organizational leadership and learning cycle that emerged in the original study. Finally, it considers implications from the research for instructional and organizational leadership in a data rich environment.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing advancement of online and blended learning, particularly in secondary and higher education institutions, has resulted in a growing consensus that both practitioners and researchers in the arena of education need new models for looking at professional practices at school and classroom levels (Collins & Halverson, 2009). In particular, the geographically distributed and digitally mediated nature of online learning has highlighted the ways in which traditional models of classroom and school leadership need to be revised in the face of a changing field (NSF Task Force on Cyberlearning, 2008). The research described in this chapter[1] was undertaken in an attempt to advance an understanding of some of the issues that may be presented by these infra-structural changes through looking at the nature of organizational leadership practices around one type of learning organization (Senge, 2006) in a contemporary immersive online environment.

The learning organizations in question are known as raiding guilds. Groups of this sort range in size from a dozen to a few hundred in size, and are found in certain types of Massively Multi-

player Online games (MMOs). MMOs are game worlds that allow thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people to play online together at the same time in a persistent virtual world[2]. While some of these games are structured to allow all of the players of the game to literally play in the same virtual world, in most instances a game's developers will host numerous copies of the world, such that the total number of players of the game far exceeds the portion occupying a single version of the online space. This is the case with *World of Warcraft®[3]* by Blizzard Entertainment™, the largest MMO in terms of playership, and the most profitable game in the history of the genre.

World of Warcraft, known to players of the game as *WoW*, was the virtual world that this research focused on. A video game, and especially a game with the word war in the title, might seem like an odd place to look to when considering the future of instructional leadership. However, there are a number of features of raiding guilds as organizations, including the manner in which they are situated within a larger affinity space (Gee, 2004), that make them particularly promising for looking at how an online learning organization can function, and what the shape of leadership practices within such organizations can look like. Perhaps even more significantly, organizations like *WoW* raiding guilds exist in extremely data rich environments as a result of the digital structures through which the game functions. By considering the interplay between these structures and the human agents within a space like *WoW*, it is possible to gain some perspective on how ubiquitous access to data might affect member participation and leadership practices in developing online learning organizations.

Following the provision of some necessary background for understanding the findings from this work and an explanation of the methods utilized in the study, this chapter will proceed by delineating those ways in which *WoW* raiding guilds provide a useful point of reference for looking at the present and future of education and

instructional leadership, and those ways in which leadership in *WoW* is highly context dependent and less useful outside of the domain of online gaming. The next section will offer an overview of the core model of leadership and learning practices in *World of Warcraft* that emerged through the study. Finally, this chapter will look specifically at what the implications of this research are for instructional leadership in increasingly data rich ecologies.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Before considering research that provided a precedent for the study presented here or looking at the specific approach taken in this work, some readers will likely benefit from a basic introduction to *World of Warcraft* in order to understand the context in which this study took place. Within the game "genre"[4] of MMOs, massively multiplayer online *role-playing* games like *WoW* are a sub-genre in which core game mechanics are drawn from the much older genre of role-playing games. Players in these virtual worlds create fantasy characters for themselves (often referred to as player avatars), take on quests from various pre-programmed "non-player" characters in the game, create in-game goods which can be used or traded to other players, fight virtual monsters by themselves and in groups of various sizes, and receive virtual rewards for doing so in the form of in-game currency or virtual items that their characters can use. You may gather from this description that *WoW* is based in a fantasy setting populated by creatures like elves and trolls, and filled with items like magic swords and potions. While not all MMOs (or for that matter all role-playing games) take place in this sort of fantasy setting, it's an extremely common type of world for games of this sort. Graphically speaking, *WoW* is a 3D game with a stylized cartoonish look, and players usually view the world from a third person perspective where they can see their own avatars.

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