

# **Lost Within a Parallel World**

**World of Warcraft, the most addicting massive multiplayer online role-playing game?**

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Not long ago, on January 22, 2008, the globally renowned gaming company Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. announced that subscribership for *World of Warcraft*, its award-winning massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), has continued to climb, recently passing 10 million worldwide. Since the game came out in 2004, it has remained as one of the most popular international videogames. *World of Warcraft* now hosts more than 2 million subscribers in Europe, more than 2.5 million in North America, and approximately 5.5 million in Asia (Blizzard Entertainment).

With records for the best selling game over the past several years and ever increasing membership, it is clear that *World of Warcraft* contains powerful draws, but what exactly makes this game so attractive? People flock to these programs seeking refuge from the imperfect world around them. Multiplayer online role-playing games offer a social attribute that many games lack; the worlds provide unique opportunities to create an entire virtual life, control your destiny, command teams, gain power, status, and prestige all without risk. Gamers can be anything they want to be without worry about the potential permanent repercussions of their actions.

It is no wonder that these games have exploded across the global market. But, with their increasing success, there are rising concerns of addiction that are associated with obsessive gaming behavior. These problems have been described as an “obsession with these games [that] can lead to bad habits or worse” (Lamb). Habits include avoiding food and sleep for many hours at a stretch while lost inside the game. In August 2005, a South Korean in his 20s died after he spent 50 hours, taking only short breaks, playing an online game at an Internet cafe (Lamb).

Being that *World of Warcraft* is one of the most popular massive multiplayer online role-playing games, it has drawn an especially notorious reputation for addiction. But, is this reputation really deserved? Teenagers are often typified as the mainstay of the gaming population. Yet, even in this environment it appears that MMORPGs are considered taboo. Are these negative reactions legitimately based on widespread issues that affect players or is this genre of game play grossly exaggerated through excessive media coverage and a lack of understanding?

To completely understand the conclusions drawn from gameplay, it is important to realize the context surrounding the typical gaming experience. This environment revolves around the stereotypical “gamer.” Although about 15% of the MMORPG audience is comprised of females, it is a role largely filled by males. When asked about the differences between how a college male and female generally spend their free time, a freshman at the University of Denver responded that she felt boys were more apt to “chill out, watch TV, and play videogames,” while girls tended to socialize and thrive in the energy of interaction and relationships. The traits Katy assigned to the males are often attributed as being lazy or unproductive, both negative aspects that are directly tied to the idea of gaming.

Consistently, the female participants in the interviews agreed that *World of Warcraft* and similar online role-playing games contributed to negative social and academic effects. In fact, when asked to describe why this genre was particularly singled out, *all* participants used one word: addiction. The girls expressed feelings of rejection when friends would choose a virtual experience over social interaction with their peers.

Close friendships are affected by even minor gameplay. Two students, also freshmen at the University of Denver, described their continuous discomfort concerning the topic of videogames. Clara and Steven are both academically focused students with vibrant, social

personalities. Steven enjoys playing several online computer games during his spare time, whereas Clara prefers to socialize and interact with friends. Both students' activities represent what has previously been characterized as stereotypical trends for college males and females. When asked whether her friend's gaming habits bother her, Clara responded, "No, not really. I just think that it is funny that he wants to play with the computer instead of talking with us and experiencing real life." Often these feelings are expressed or are overtly apparent to students who indulge in even a small amount of gameplay. They feel hesitant about their habits as if their actions are inappropriate. When pressed, many non-gamers considered their friends to have some level of addiction to the game that they played, citing anomalies such as public gameplay, gaming instead of doing homework, and periods of time passed without eating or getting up to go out because of in-game pressure.

Although Steven probably plays less than the average candidate for obsession, his experience provides insight into why MMORPGs and their players are being called addicting and addicted, respectively. When interviewed about his gaming, Steven exhibited abnormal withdrawal from the topic and contributed to the discussion only to briefly respond to the questions asked of him. When asked what videogames he plays, Steven laughed nervously saying, "I don't know... I do not play videogames all that often! I just get bored and want something to do. They are fun." Along with many students who play *World of Warcraft* and other massive multiplayer online games, Steven feels an overt pressure from his peers to stop his videogame habits.

What happens is that gamers are often forced into acting like addicts. Through excessive social pressure, gaming is often hidden from public view, family, and friends for fear of reprisal. Often people feel embarrassed when talking about gameplay with non-gamers or in a public

environment. Playing becomes a guilty pleasure, only to be indulged to the extent that it might be acceptable by others and to hide played time that might be deemed otherwise. All of these emotions and external pressures combine to create the very connotation of addiction, even for players who are not obsessed with the game at all.

Oddly, this was not the case with multiplayer games such as those exhibited in Nintendo or Xbox. One female even reminisced on her experiences playing Mario Kart 64 with friends in the dorm rooms. She explained that while playing in an interactive, player versus player environment she felt a connection that seemed to lack in the massive multiplayer online games. By creating a face to face relationship, peers feel less alienated from the game setting as they can physically engage each other in the experience.

If this idea of addiction really was related to social pressure, the next question was where did these socially common, negative feelings come from? To initiate further research I decided to create my own experiment with my peers in the dormitory. I wanted to observe their reactions to public gameplay and begin to understand what would cause them to reject online gameplay and its players. To do this, I placed myself in the central lobby on our floor in the dormitory and began playing *World of Warcraft*. I decided that by going into the lobby I might be able to gain more unique and natural reactions to “public gaming addiction.” Why should playing a game in the lobby be any different than watching television in the lobby?

During the interviews I found that non-gamers pointed to a mysterious “gaming addiction,” where as players pointed to a strong social pressure that caused them to feel uncomfortable with their activities. What I found in the lobby was that people, once they figured out what I was doing, would gather around me and watch as I played. After an initial jeer they would either talk about something else or become focused on the game. Often their attention

would be rapt anywhere from one minute to several minutes. Some would ask questions concerning gameplay; others began to say that they wished they had my writing class, but all ended with some sort of slight jab at the game as they departed. They would laugh or say “don’t get addicted” or talk about how they were going to go do something productive.

These observations were extremely interesting because the participants did not know to what extent their actions were being observed. Although they did refer back to the idea of addiction, I found their interest in what I was doing to be a unique observation. Why, if so many people exhibit interested behavior in the game are they so afraid of it? I think the answer lies in the very answers to their interviews: addiction. They feel drawn into the game. This immersion is particularly noteworthy in *World of Warcraft* because, as Krzywinska has argued, the game’s worldness is so comprehensive. Her research has focused heavily on the complexity of virtually realistic worlds. People who do not play see the respite that gamers find in the virtual world and realize that, yes, it is fun. Then there is a withdrawal, some moment of reality hits them or they temporarily lose interest and become determined to refocus themselves on their previous activities. To complete their rejection they add in their negative opinions, which force the gamer to feel guilty for “chilling” in the game world. This does not happen with TV or social video gaming – Mario Kart for example – because people are interacting with each other as opposed to virtual players.

This leads me to wonder why people are afraid of playing, of gaining some sort of “addiction.” By virtue of the answers to the interviews, it appears that a portion of this addiction scare is generated through media exaggeration and a lack of understanding of this virtual interaction. At the same time, there is a competitive peer pressure to perform academically and socially in both the college environment and within the world of work. Social acceptance

represents a major factor in personal life satisfaction. If people disapprove of your actions, this factors into how you view yourself and those actions that have been called into question. One clear aspect of this pressure is channeled through media coverage. Directly affected by popular social patterns, agencies of mass communication define the voice of society and wield incredible amounts of conforming power, which may explain the negative perspectives through which game players are stereotyped.

In June 2005, it was reported that a child had died due to neglect by her *World of Warcraft*-addicted parents in Korea (Gibson). Her parents had left her alone while going to an Internet café to play. They were charged with her death and similar stories of extreme gaming appeared around the world. These cases of addiction, along with growing memberships, have prompted equally extreme reactions from organizations and even governments. In August of 2005, the government of the People's Republic of China proposed new rules to curb what they perceived to be social and financial costs brought on by the popularity of online games in general. The measure enforces a time limit on China's estimated total of 20 million gamers (BBC News). Citizens are allowed to play for five consecutive hours before their characters' abilities become severely limited; only after a five hour break will the limitations be removed. Due to extreme cases such as murder, neglect, and sudden death, media coverage has capitalized on the world's newest addictive trend. It is true, computer games, massive multiplayer online role-playing games in particular, can cause certain levels of addiction. So can television, violent videogames, sex, drugs, sports, and work, but these are no longer new, hot topics in the market.

By exploiting a lack of knowledge concerning online gaming, the media has highlighted the addictive qualities these games contain. Entire businesses have sprung up to deal with symptoms of obsession. Dr. Maressa Orzack, a clinical psychologist at McLean Hospital

in Newton, Massachusetts, was interviewed August 8, 2006, stating that "40 percent of players are addicted." The 40% figure was not derived from a scientific study overseen by Dr. Orzack, but rather came from "a forum that Nick Yee runs" (Orzack). Interestingly, Nick Yee goes on to question the accuracy of his data sighting several control factors that need to be examined in his research (Yee). Also, through the personal research described earlier, it appears that many players are forced into exhibiting and feeling characteristics of addiction when this is not, necessarily, the case. She added in an August 2006 interview that "even if the percentage is 5 to 10 percent, which is standard for most addictive behaviors, it is a huge number of people who are out of control" (Reimer). In this, Dr. Orzack is absolutely correct, but the statement lacks context. The only other activities that have recovery programs are usually alcoholism and drug addiction. Generally, videogame playing does not fall under these categories. Why should online gameplay be any different than other, more common, addictions?

Through his research, Nick Yee examines the phenomenon of "cherry picking addictions." He compares the physical and social effects associated with an addiction to playing football to an "addiction" to massive multiplayer online role-playing games. Death from playing games is seen as death from addiction, where as the death and debilitation from football focuses solely on external forces acting upon the player, not their addiction, which continues to destroy their bodies and puts them at risk (Yee). This difference primarily stems from the assumption that the real world is wholesome and fulfilling while the virtual world is impoverished and limited. All social and external factors involved in the "worldness" of the game are instead categorized as a single physical addiction, without taking into account all of the aspects associated with a person's involvement in both the real world and the virtual.

So, how real is this “*World of Warcraft* addiction”? It is as real as society makes it. As confirmed by Nick Yee’s studies and through firsthand research, people mold and describe addiction through whatever perception society supplies to them. It certainly appears that gamers exhibit a majority of the attributes commonly associated with addiction. The fact that these attributes are socially induced is common among most addictions. However, it is clear that the idea of gaming addiction is extremely blown out of proportion through a lack of familiarity with the concept of a virtual world. Because the game world is seen as less than productive, any involvement in it is, therefore, seen as a waste of time. When society sees children and adults alike engaging in increasing numbers in this activity it concerns people and causes some level of fear, which is molded, mainly through media publicity, into an increasingly negative attitude.

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