

Experience of World of Warcraft

First of all one of the things that people often ask is whether *World of Warcraft* is so much better than *Second Life*. You shouldn't compare them. It's like apples and oranges. People who are my age may remember MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). They spun off MOOs (MUD object oriented) and MUSHes (Multi-User Shared Hack), where it was more about creating things and creating objects. The kinds of people who participated in MOOs and MUSHes were very different from the kinds of people who participated in MUDs. MUDs were more about constraints and limitations and game-play. You could die in MUDs. When I played the original MUD at Essex University, I was one level from becoming immortal and then I was killed. And in the original MUD, when you were dead, you were dead. There was a cemetery where you could just walk back to your corpse. You were dead and had to start over again.

If you compare *Second Life* and MMORPGs, it is a completely different thing. It is like the difference between being a racing car driver and being in some kind of experimental mechanical lab. While they are both virtual worlds and they are both sort of classified in the same genre, I don't think we should compare them really. I use both of them quite a bit, but differently. In *Second Life* on my island, we have a very good video screening area. I can screen raid videos. We can sit around and watch them and talk about them on maintenance day when the servers are down. We can sit around and talk about strategy while we watch. A lot of my friends are building a replica of Iron Forge where we can sort of hang around when the servers are down too.

You start *World of Warcraft* rather lonely, by yourself. You've got this little toolbar. And you're looking around trying to figure out what to do. You quickly realize, when you reach a slightly higher level, that you can work together with other people to take down bigger, bad guys. Then, when you get to level 40, you get a mount, so you can ride and move around a lot faster. And this is a very important part of your experience, and then, hey, you're level 60, hey, you've won *Warcraft*. [This talk was before the expansion. Now the maximum level is level 70.]

This is the entrance to *Molten Core*. And *Molten Core* is the first 40-man dungeon that you get to play. You have to be level 60, you have to do some quests to be allowed to get in here. But basically there are forty people, eight classes, five in each class. You've healers that heal, you've got tanks that hold these monsters' attention. The healers heal the tanks, and you've got the mages and other classes who do a lot of damage and take bad guys down. Then you've got a variety of other classes that do other roles. But the key to this is getting this group together. And





also when this group isn't perfectly balanced, figuring out the right strategy is also a challenge. Imagine trying to organize 40 people every weekend to go to a movie and have eight different roles for each of those people. And make them do that over and over again all day for about eight hours. It's a boring, yet difficult, task. In order to get that Artemis set that I had, you have to do this every weekend, for about six months.

This is kind of like a ball. First you work to level 60. Grinding by yourself at the beginning, then with five people, then with ten people, and finally you get to go to the ball with 40 people.

When you finally get here and you realize this is the first time you've ever seen 40 of your fellow guild mates in one place at one time. And there's an enormous amount of coordination that's required. You have raid leaders, you have class leaders—I have about eight different channels going in my chat, with eight different colors for all the different things that I have to coordinate. Some researchers are saying you learn things like project management. This is a great metaphor for some kinds of real-time project management. You get a group together, you learn what each person can do, figure out if there are resources you can put together, and move forward. Clearly there are lots of direct and indirect things you can learn from this. You can learn how people work under stress. You can learn how good people are at communicating. My raid leader is a nightshift nurse in Virginia. Our main tank is a foreman in Australia, one of our rogues is a bartender with ADD. There is an immense amount of diversity in our guild and you can see how their backgrounds help in the game. However, there is a lot of common ground considering the diversity.

One thing I've noticed though: I haven't found a single MBA so far who is good at leadership in this situation. Most of the people who are good at leading here are people who are good at listening. It's actually very similar to leadership in open source. John Seely Brown brings up a very interesting point—that there's another level of learning that you get. It's a kind of imagination and emotional thing, and he uses the word "ensemble". I don't know the German word for this, but it's when you have a band or an orchestra together and suddenly you are in "the zone" and everything just feels right—you've just got it just right. When you don't have it right, a 40-man raid can disappear in less than ten minutes. Everybody just blows up. When you're in the zone it just feels right and everything works together.

And it really does feel like some kind of magic when you work and work, and suddenly 40 people are working together in concert. Without having to know the whole of it, they do their part and somehow it works out. I get kids in my guild who are 14 years old. They act like 14-year olds. But when they get into a raid, they realize that if they do something stupid they get kicked out



or people get mad at them. If they do something right, suddenly they have 39 adults telling them how great they are. There is a sense of being part of a group and achievement as a group. It is something that you can learn. In my guild, I have priests, soldiers, a policeman, students, business people—I have just about every kind of person from a cross-section of society you can imagine, and it's actually overwhelmingly working class. If you look at *Second Life* it's kind of intellectual. [OK, sort of. ;-)]

For example, the other day, I was chatting with some kid who's just decided that he's going to Iraq because it's better than the option of staying at home in America because then he can pay for college when he comes back and become a computer scientist. Sometimes our priest, AKMA, will jump in and clarify theological things for me. The depth and the diversity represented in many of our chats is broader than any other medium I've ever participated in.

It's very different from a chat channel or online form. For instance, our warrior or "tank" has to have fire-resist gear for *Molten Core*. It's really, really hard to get enough fire-resist gear to tank *Molten Core*. It requires lots of people to help you. Many of the pieces of gear that you need require hundreds of hours of other people's time. By the time you get to the point of tanking *Molten Core*, you have lots of people in the guild who have invested hundreds of hours in your gear. Some of them are 15-year olds, some of them are soldiers, and you owe them and you've done things where they owe you.

AKMA, our real life priest and I were talking about the organization the other day. It's more like a congregation than anything else. You can leave when you want, you don't pay taxes. You PAY to play the game. You show up because you want to be part of the group. You can leave whenever you want, there's no one forcing you to do anything, but you have this set of norms, you have a shared activity.

The threat meter—when monsters are attacking somebody they attack the most threatening person. Warriors have lots of talents to increase their threat, even though they're not doing much damage. Mages have things to decrease their threat, even though they're doing a lot of damage. You have all kinds of tricks. What you do is you watch yourself on the threat meter so that you don't go over the warrior, otherwise you're going to be dead. It is very sophisticated. What it does is it takes all these combat messages from the game. It parses them, figures out how much threat each one is generating based on all the different kinds of magic that's around, discounting and amplifying and all of that. Then it generates the threat for each of its players. Every time they make a patch and change the rules or change the parameters they have to go back and re-do everything. Every time the boss' message changes when he's casting something,

they have to change the add-on. It's crazy. They're parsing text because there's no API (application program interface) for this. But we have an excellent threat meter that works. There's a huge add-on community that's making all this stuff, despite the rather different process. This is fairly sophisticated interface completely customized for myself. I don't think anyone has the same interface. At this point it's no longer about 3D.

Richard Bartle is my hero. But he came from the day when we had cyberspace, and Bartle was talking about cyberspace and the real world. In Japan I don't think we really believe in cyberspace any more. Cyberspace is part of our real world. And I don't see my cyberspace identity as something separate nearly as much as I think the old guys do. I mean, I know that we have our online personas and pseudonyms and stuff like that. But one of the things that was part of this cyberspace thinking for Richard Bartle was that when you're in a game you're in a virtual world, you're in a fantasy, and you don't want to shatter that fantasy. You don't want somebody to take you out of cyberspace when you don't want to get out of cyberspace. People started talking about whether voice over IP should be allowed for talking to each other when we're playing the games—for coordination. He said no. This is back in 2003. He said it would be “an immersion-busting, reality-intrusive, anti-role-playing debasement of what virtual worlds are”. And a lot of the game guys were against it. *Warcraft* doesn't have it built in, so we use things like TeamSpeak and Ventrilo. They are external applications to do the coordination by voice. But there is no more fantasy. It's seamless, the real world and the game.

So what's important to note is that—you can do this on Skype—you can sit around, connect 10 people together and have it open. But for some reason—and we have tried it as a test—people want to start the conversation and then end it. They're not used to the idea of always having a voice connection. It's weird. The thing that you learn on TeamSpeak is firstly that you push to talk. When two people collide there's a pause. You have a protocol where you both back off. At the beginning it's sort of clunky, but after a while it sort of works. You just learn how to use this thing so that 40 people can be talking at the same time on the same channel. You have very little problem communicating the essential things, and you learn how to talk in small pieces and get things through. I sometimes sit around all day long—say eight hours with TeamSpeak on. You never sit around in that kind of mode on the telephone. While we have technologies like Skype or voice-over IP that theoretically allow you to do this, because we don't have the user experience of actually having to use something like that, we haven't generated that kind of behavior in our workplace. I think one of the interesting things about MMORPGs and voice is that it's creating a culture of having TeamSpeak on. I have TeamSpeak on my speakers at my house, so even when I'm not in the game I can hear people talking. They can call me and I can





go in. It's this ambient sound so I know how the guild is doing—if somebody's going crazy or somebody has a problem at home. When one of your guys picked up a girl and her lesbian girlfriend came and beat him up, the first place he goes is to TeamSpeak to explain it to everyone. It's a very important kind of water cooler.

When you have 400 people together, one of the things that always happens is drama. Everyone who has run organizations knows that running 400 people in an organization is very difficult. And, unlike chat, we have loot.

A typical example would be, you're in some dungeon, and there's something you really need. And somebody who doesn't really need it gets it. That becomes a really big point of tension. Drama always exists in parties and also in guilds. For that we have a lot of outside tools. We have forums where a lot of things happen. We have bylaws on a wiki. The bylaws are the rules that we use to govern our guilds—what are you allowed to do, what aren't you allowed to do, our core values. We share this between horde and alliance. And we are about to organize Bylawcon so we can all get together and revise the bylaws.

One of the interesting things is that when I set up these bylaws, I looked at a lot of open source projects. I looked at Wikipedia, I looked at Mozilla, I looked at some of the others. I'm not an expert in open source, although I play one on TV. I was asking a lot of people about open source and managing open source. I think there's a lot that you can learn. It's absolutely not the same. It is very open, in that lots of people can come in, and you're rewarding mostly by giving people credit. I think there's a lot we can learn from the management in *World of Warcraft*. The biggest difference, I think, is that the diversity of the kind of people who participate in *World of Warcraft* makes it a challenge. For instance, really basic things, like you should respect each other. Some people when they first come are like "WHY? WHY? Why should we respect each other?" And then you sit down and explain why it actually is a good thing. Some people come in who are racist. We've had some very racist people in our guild. But if you sit down and explain, "well you know, would you say that, if you knew the other person was that race", and they said "no". And then, like, "how do you know in the game that we don't have you know, Chinese or whatever?" People realize, "Oh he's a real priest". They suddenly realize that the diversity in this guild is actually a plus. They suddenly feel the euphoria of being able to talk to a group, and having a reverend sit there and laugh at their jokes, and realize that tolerance in their speech is worth the trade off of being able to communicate with a whole diverse range of people. Embracing diversity is something a lot of kids don't know anything about, especially in America. And they come to our guild and realize that Chinese kids can be smart too. There's a fifteen-year-old kid who apologized for asking me whether I was Japanese. I said don't worry about it. He said, "will you still be my friend if I ask you if you're Japanese?" I think, depending on the culture you come from, it's very differ-

ent. What is interesting is that as you codify and you write it down, you realize that things that you take for granted aren't taken for granted by everybody else. But a lot of this is about trust and reputation.

On the issue of using game content to make videos and images—*Second Life* is much better. *Second Life* allows you to own the content, they encourage Machinima and have video capture built in. Blizzard, they're friendly, but when I asked them if I could use a screen shot in a magazine to talk about how great they are, they said OK, talk to our legal department. And the legal department said, "What kind of magazine is it?" I said it's owned by a company called Hitachi, and they said, "Is that a corporation? What do they do?" They said, "You have to sign a contract to use this screen shot." So I didn't use the screen shot. But they don't understand—I think they understand the value of fan art, but they don't understand this notion of sharing and copying yet.

I think there's a lot of pretty interesting things going on in the guilds, but I would love better guild management tools. For instance, right now, when we're about to run a raid, what I would love to be able to do is to say, "how many of my priests are available right now, the ones that are available, send them an SMS to see if they're available, in this order." And if I'm a priest and I'm sitting around doing my garden and I get an SMS saying we're about to run *Molten Core* and were short of priests, I'll come running. I think that this is an important thing. *Second Life* has done it pretty well. They've got an API and a way to interact with the web and things like that. The problem with *Warcraft* is that since we don't have real-time communication, it's very difficult to build applications that allow guilds to interact with things like that in the game. I don't see them opening that up in the future. Another big issue around *Warcraft* is actually that there are theories around gold farmers who basically play the game professionally. They take their items and they sell them and get gold, and then they sell their gold for real money on the Internet. Blizzard says it's out of bounds. Some Chinese game companies have actually started doing this item exchange as part of their business model. *Second Life* has this Linden Dollar exchange. Hopefully, some of the open source stuff like Croquet and other things may start developing to the point where they may be some kind of open-source model or something where we can take from learning about *World of Warcraft*. At the end of the day, I think everything is still heading towards more user control, more open source, more open API, more open standards, more open intellectual property. But what this whole thing is is an indication of a behavior change. That's why it's important. It's important that we have millions and millions of people who are learning how to interact with this, and that we can think up projects that tap that.

Transcript of a presentation given by Joichi Ito at the 23rd Chaos Communications Congress on World of Warcraft in Berlin on December 28, 2006

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