Social Significance in Playing Online? You Betcha!

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Since last winter I have lost 10 pounds, landed a cool new job at this newspaper and made peace with my roommate's cat, all significant achievements. Yet outside my romantic and family life, nothing this year has given me more satisfaction than helping my guild in World of Warcraft defeat Ragnaros for the first time early Tuesday morning.

World of Warcraft has been the video game world's breakout phenomenon since its introduction last November, signing up more than 3.5 million paying subscribers worldwide. Ragnaros, a giant, seething fire god, is one of the game's signature foes. Protected by powerful giants and elementals deep within the lava-laced Molten Core, Ragnaros is so tough to get to that only a tiny sliver of the game's players have ever even confronted him. Yet his fearsome reputation is...
known far and wide.

People who don't play games often think of them as solitary, nonsocial diversions. And certainly some people still enjoy playing games alone, both physically and virtually. But the most meaningful gaming experiences usually involve other humans, whether a buddy sitting on the couch next to you or a partner or adversary on the other side of cyberspace.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (known as M.M.O.'s) like World of Warcraft allow thousands of players to explore vast virtual worlds simultaneously and are predicated on social interaction among those players. A decade ago such games were rare, almost exclusively based on text instead of on graphics and almost never commercially viable. This year players around the world are on pace to spend more than $1 billion on such games, much of it in recurring subscription fees. Besides World of Warcraft, other top M.M.O.'s include City of Heroes, Dark Age of Camelot, Everquest II and Lineage.

The basic game mechanism in M.M.O.'s is the same as it has been in single-player dungeon crawls since the late 1970's: kill monsters, take their treasure and gain experience, which then allows you to defeat more powerful monsters. Rinse and repeat until the player has defeated the most powerful bad guy. Coupled with a (sometimes) interesting story that explains why the player is killing all these monsters, that basic formula still attracts customers.

But the real power in a massively multiplayer experience is profoundly social. Millions of gamers around the planet are flocking to M.M.O.'s not merely because they can kill ever more powerful digital monsters, but because they can face those foes and defeat them as part of a team of real live comrades-in-arms. Halfway serious M.M.O. players usually join guilds of perhaps 10 to 100 players. While players are free to team up with others outside their guild, the guild is usually the prime unit of social organization. Being a member of an accomplished guild is like being a
member of the Augusta National Golf Club or the New
York Yankees. It both conveys power and commands respect (or envy). And of course there are competing
guilds, and beating them to the good stuff is half the fun.

That is a big reason that defeating Ragnaros on Tuesday
was such a meaningful experience. Not only was it the first
time that my guild defeated him; it was the first time that
anyone on our server had defeated him. (Massively
multiplayer games are generally divided into parallel copies
of the game world called servers. Players generally cannot
move their characters from one server to another, so each
server becomes its own neighborhood with its own
economy and social structure. In North America, for
instance, World of Warcraft players are split among about
100 servers.)

So far more than being an individual triumph, defeating
Ragnaros was a validation of our guild's entire
organization. It was the culmination of months of work by
dozens of people who each play the game at least 20 hours
a week and in some cases far more. Our guild started with a
handful of players in December with the goal of being the
first on our server to experience and defeat the toughest,
most rewarding challenges World of Warcraft had to offer.
In addition to the dragon Onyxia, Ragnaros was always our
prime measuring stick.

But it was not until April that we had enough experience,
power and sheer size in the guild to even start exploring the
Molten Core. Molten Core raids generally require 40
people playing at once, and over the two months it took us
to get to Ragnaros we came to realize that as in so many
areas of life, teamwork and discipline are far more
important than raw power. Yet even after getting to
Ragnaros, it took us five more weeks to defeat him.

(W.O.W. players, here are some tips that worked for us: get
basic fire-resistance above 150 for each raid member, load
up on damage-enhancing and fire-absorbing potions and
lay down frost area-of-effect spells on Ragnaros's
protectors, the Sons of Flame. And if you don't get
Ragnaros below 45 percent health before the first Sons
phase, you're probably in trouble. As always, your mileage
may vary.)
When I try to describe to people the deep camaraderie and esprit de corps in a high-level game guild, I usually find that the only ones who immediately understand are people with military experience and people who have played serious team sports. After all, in their day-to-day lives most people never really work on a team. (Newspaper writing, for instance, can often be a lone-wolf, eat-what-you-kill operation.) Most people never experience interdependence second by second. Even if your employer says you are working on something larger, many people spend all day in a cubicle or at a counter and never really know if they are making a difference. That's what "Dilbert" is all about.

But gamers get to know that their team killed the beast and got the treasure, much as athletes get to know that their team won the game and soldiers get to know that their side defeated the enemy. Those are powerful, even addictive emotions, and many people who experience them can never truly give them up.