Team Building in World of Warcraft

Todd Simmons

St. Edward's University

May 5, 2010

DMBA6224: Business Communication

Introduction

The video game World of Warcraft is a popular form of entertainment enjoyed by millions of people around the globe. In addition to its entertainment value, the game also holds potentially valuable lessons for businesses, especially in the realm of team building. However, while there have been many academic papers written about World of Warcraft, there appears to be no comprehensive study available on the topic of team building in the game. So, this paper will explore the issue of team building in World of Warcraft, with the goal of illuminating how businesses might utilize the game, and ideas gleaned from it, to enhance the effectiveness of their teams.

Method

The method used in this study was that of a literature review. The first step in conducting this review was to thoroughly search the academic databases for references to "World of Warcraft". Thankfully, there was a large number of academic papers available that are either explicitly about the game or contain references to it. Therefore, the next step in the research process was to narrow down the literature by focusing on papers that relate specifically to team building in World of Warcraft or contain relevant lessons on this topic. This search yielded a large number of results examining the issue from a variety of perspectives. This paper will highlight common themes from the literature by examining various aspects of team building that are potentially benefitted by World of Warcraft.

Discussions

World of Warcraft Background

World of Warcraft (WoW) is an online game, created by the company Blizzard Entertainment, with over 10 million active players. (Alexander, 2008) It belongs to a genre of games commonly referred to as "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games" (or MMORPG). In order to better understand what this type of game involves, it is helpful to break this term down into its component parts. Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) means that the game is played over the internet and takes place in a virtual world where thousands or millions of players interact with one another. Each player of the game often pays a monthly subscription

fee, and they use client software on their computer or gaming console to connect to a server, usually maintained by the game's publisher, which hosts the virtual world and stores information related to all the players. Role Playing Games (RPG's) are a type of game where players control a virtual character, or avatar, which they can customize and direct to take specific actions. (wiseGEEK)

World of Warcraft is set in a fantasy world filled with elements common to this genre of entertainment such as dragons, dungeons, treasure, and magic. Each player must choose to play as part of two possible factions: The Alliance or The Horde. In addition, each player must select a "race" for their avatar, with options including Elf, Dwarf, Gnome, Orc, and Human. Also, players must choose a gender and class for their avatar, as well as customize their appearance and choose a name. Finally, players may choose to specialize in a particular skill, such as first aid, fishing, tailoring, mining, blacksmithing, or herbalism. (Sasaki, 2007)

The purpose of WoW is to acquire experience points (EXP) and "level up" one's virtual character by successfully completing challenges of gradually increasing difficulty. (Hagel et al, 2009) An important aspect of the game is that players can join "guilds", or teams. This allows the players to embark on more difficult group "raids", or missions. The most successful guilds are those in which the members have complementary skills, and they help one another to complete challenges that would otherwise be impossible. (Sasaki, 2007)

Elements of Team Building in WoW

World of Warcraft contains important lessons and possible application to several elements of successful team building. These include communication, collaboration, socializing, role adoption, group dynamics, motivation, metrics, and training. The following section will examine these elements of team building in the context of the game.

Communication/Collaboration. Perhaps the most obvious element of team building that appears in WoW is communication and collaboration. Of course, good communication is invaluable to a team's ability to work together smoothly and effectively, and communication is central to the experience in WoW. A study in the journal of CyberPsychology in October 2009 sought to understand the motives among young adults for playing online games, specifically CounterStrike and World of Warcraft. The researchers found that participation in online gaming

is primarily motivated by a desire for cooperation and communication. (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009) Similarly, Nick Yee, a scientist as the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) found that players of WoW derived great satisfaction from collaborating with others in a structured way. (Yee, 2005)

As Seth Schiesel so eloquently said in the New York Times, "what makes games fundamentally different from books, movies and television shows is that a game is merely a framework for players to create their own narrative. And the great thing about a game is that a player can weave other real people into the story being created". (Schiesel, 2005) Another researcher found that MMO players engage in "collaborative problem solving practices in cross-functional teams within the game". (Steinkuehler, 2007) And John Seely Brown compared playing WoW in a guild to being a member of an orchestra or ensemble, where everything fits into place like magic, and players gain satisfaction from having achieved something as part of a group. (Debatty, 2006)

So, clearly WoW is an ideal environment for collaboration and communication and there are several possible lessons a business might learn from this. First, they may wish to design their workplace environments to maximize collaboration and encourage members of different disciplines to work together closely on projects. Also, companies may wish to have their employees actually play WoW as a group, in order to gain a better sense of collaboration that will hopefully transfer to the offline world.

On a similar note, WoW is also very effective at encouraging people to socialize with one another. Socializing is important to teams because it helps build bonds of trust and friendship among the team members. According to research by Jennifer Demski, WoW provides a non-threatening environment where players can network with one another. She also found that networking within WoW can potentially substitute for other forms of social interaction with coworkers that are less common today, such as going to the pub after work. In addition, normal workplace hierarchies are subverted within the game – for example, a supervisor in real life may become a common soldier in the game. This leads to social interactions that may not occur at a regular workplace social function. (Demski, 2009)

So, companies can essentially use WoW in the same way that they might have used an employee golf tournament a generation ago. (Pinckard, 2006) However, research indicates that some individuals may become so enmeshed in the virtual world of WoW that it can harm their

real world social interactions, and thus lead to negative psychological impacts. (Longman, 2009)
Therefore, companies should be careful to monitor employees for signs of addiction and be
prepared to provide counseling if necessary.

      Team Member Roles and Group Dynamics. Another element of team building that
can be found in WoW is role adoption. Most high functioning teams have members with clearly
defined and complementary roles. So, it is valuable to examine a setting like WoW where role
adoption is central to the experience. A study in the journal of CyberPsychology found that
players often use WoW to explore issues of identity and try out different roles. (Bessière et al,
2007) Another study found that games make it possible to try out roles and behaviors that would
be impossible in real life. (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009) One researcher asked 15 veterans of
WoW to rate how well certain words described themselves and their avatars while having their
brains scanned. Interestingly, the same brain regions lit up during thoughts of real self as during
thoughts of their avatar. (New Scientist, 2009) So, obviously players of WoW have a high level
of identification with their avatars. Therefore, it may be helpful for companies to use WoW in
the workplace to allow employees to try out different roles on a team.

      For example, one role that players could try out in WoW is that of team leader.
Businesses have a strong incentive to identify and train new leaders, since an effective leader is
highly influential on the success of a team. A study by IBM found that games could be used as
"management flight simulators", giving workers an opportunity to manage a global workforce in
a virtual setting, before doing so in the real world. (McConnon, 2007) According to Joichi Ito, a
prominent tech entrepreneur, WoW tells you a great deal about how well someone works under
stress and manages resources. (Debatty, 2006) Meanwhile, Nick Yee found that leadership skills
learned in massively multiplayer online games (MMO's) have a high level of transferability to a
real life setting (Yee, 2003). He also found that guild leaders in WoW became adept at
mediating conflict, making rules, and delegating. (Yee, 2006)

      Another interesting aspect of WoW is the unique team dynamics that occur within the
game. According to a 2009 BusinessWeek article, players in WoW "naturally coalesce into
guilds as they move into more advanced levels because they realize they cannot accomplish the
tasks without collaborating with others with complementary skills". As the article points out,

companies could experiment with self-organized teams in order to increase the accountability and motivation of team members. (Hagel et al, 2009)

Motivation, Metrics, and Training. Motivation is an element of team building for which WoW provides much valuable information. Motivation is vital for teams in a business setting, since it increases their productivity and follow-through on tasks. Obviously, most WoW players do not receive any form of payment for playing the game, so the game's designers must focus on providing intrinsic motivation for players. Part of how they accomplish this is by making the game challenging without being frustrating. As players progress through the game, the next level of achievement is always just in sight, thus motivating players to invest the time and energy necessary to advance. (Hagel et al, 2009) Interestingly, this ties in with the concept of flow, a psychological state originally proposed by Csikszentmihalyi, in which the individual experiences concentration, deep enjoyment, and total absorption in an activity. Flow is something that many game designers strive to achieve in their products. (Johnson, 2003)

Another thing that helps boost player motivation in WoW is that players receive widespread recognition for successfully completing a task. This recognition comes from their fellow players, as well as from the game itself, in which their achievement often unlocks new skills and abilities. (Hagel et al, 2009) Nick Yee notes that many MMO's resemble real work with their demanding play schedules and repetitive tasks. Yet, the games motivate people to continue playing by employing behavioral conditioning techniques, such as the timing and layering of reward mechanisms that train players to derive pleasure from the "work" that is being done. (Yee, 2006) In addition, once part of a guild, players are motivated by the desire not to let their team down. (Hagel et al, 2009) And finally, Jane McGonigal postulated in a presentation at the TED Conference that gamers are partially motivated by a sense of epic adventure and powerful goals. (McGonigal, 2010)

Clearly, many of these ideas could be applied in the workplace to achieve better motivation for both teams and individuals. Companies could strive to design their tasks and reward systems for maximum effect. They could also encourage fellow employees to publicly recognize coworkers for successfully completing challenging tasks. And they could attempt to instill their work with a greater sense of mission and purpose. Of course, businesses must take

care to avoid using behavioral conditioning techniques in a manipulative manner, but if these techniques are employed ethically, they can produce positive results.

Another way that games like WoW achieve motivation is through the effective use of metrics and feedback. WoW provides players with a detailed, real-time on-screen dashboard that displays large quantities of information about their own performance and that of their team-mates. Players can use this information to adjust their actions on-the-fly and maximize their performance. Also, metrics allow guilds to review how they performed after a raid and determine how to fill gaps in the future. While it may be technically challenging, corporations could potentially use similar tools to give employees and teams instant feedback on their performance, which would motivate them to improve. (Hagel et al, 2009)

Yet another area where World of Warcraft could be used to enhance motivation is in relationship to training and learning. Companies are always searching for innovative ways to train their employees and using WoW, or a similar game, may be one effective tool in this effort. According to John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas, games have a high potential for experiential learning. Unlike a traditional classroom context, MMO's feature "accidental learning", where players learn as a natural byproduct of adjusting to the game's culture. Also, virtual environments are safe platforms for trial and error because the cost of failure is low. (Brown et al, 2006) James Paul Gee found that games in general embody a number of important learning principles, such as agency, well-ordered problems, situated meaning, system thinking, and cross-functional teams. (Gee, 2005)

Also, research indicates that training conducted within WoW can be quite effective. One study found that using WoW for training is roughly as effective as online distance learning. (Oliver et al, 2009) Another study found that many of the team building concepts learned from playing WoW are directly transferable to a business context. (Galagan, 2009) Meanwhile, Golub found that people better retained lessons learned in the game if they also engaged in knowedge-making activities outside of the game, such as creating a wiki. (Golub, 2010) Therefore, companies that use WoW for training may wish to encourage employees to document their experiences in the game. However, it seems clear that, if applied correctly, WoW can be an effective tool for employee training and learning.

Conclusions

Based on this review of the academic literature, it is clear that the video game World of Warcraft is indeed a useful tool to enhance team building. As noted above, the inherently social nature of the game seems to have positive implications in the areas of communication, collaboration, and socializing. Also, due to the fact that WoW is a role playing game, it holds many interesting lessons in the areas of team member role adoption and team formation. And finally, thanks to the unique design considerations of video games, WoW seems to offer some useful lessons in the areas of motivation, performance metrics, and training. Businesses may benefit from utilizing abstract lessons from the game and applying them to real life work situations. In addition, businesses may find it helpful to expose employees to hands-on time with the game for training or testing purposes.

This report leads to several logical questions that may be worth exploring in future research. First, it would be interesting to conduct a more thorough study of the actual hands-on process that businesses could use when applying WoW, or lessons from it, in the workplace. Second, it might be helpful to do a detailed analysis of the possible negative consequences or difficulties that businesses may face in adopting WoW in a professional environment. And third, it would be fascinating to compare the team building effectiveness of WoW with other off-the-shelf video games, as well as custom-designed "serious" games that are built for the express purpose of corporate training.

References

Alexander, L. (2008, January 22). World Of Warcraft Hits 10 Million Subscribers. In *Gamasutra*. Retrieved from http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/ news_index.php?story=17062

Bessière, K., Seay, A. F., & Kiesler, S. (2007, August). The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 10*(4), 530-535.

Brown, J. S., & Thomas, D. (2006, April). You Play World of Warcraft? You're Hired! *Wired Magazine, 14*(04).

Constance, C. (2007). Massively multiplayer online games & education: an outline of research. *Computer Support for Collaborative Learning* , 675-685.

Debatty, R. (2006, December 29). Joichi Ito on WoW [Web log post]. Retrieved from We Make Money Not Art: http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2006/12/joichi-ito-on-w.php

Demski, D. (2009, November). The WoW factor. *T H E Journal, 36*(10), 30-35.

Frostling-Henningsson, M. (2009, October). First-Person Shooter Games as a Way of Connecting to People: "Brothers in Blood". *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 12*(5), 557-562.

Galagan, P. (2009, May). Slash, Burn, and Learn. *T+D, 63*(5), 28-31.

Gee, J. P. (2005, Summer). Good Video Games and Good Learning. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum, 85*(2), 33-37.

Golub, A. (2010, Winter). Being in the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism, and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game. *Anthropological Quarterly, 83* , 17-45.

Hagel, J., & Brown, J. S. (2009, January 15). How World of Warcraft Promotes Innovation. *BusinessWeek*, 11.

Longman, H., O'Connor, E., & Obst, P. (2009, October). The Effect of Social Support Derived from World of Warcraft on Negative Psychological Symptoms. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 12*(5), 563-566.

McConnon, A. (2007, June 15). IBM's Management Games. *BusinessWeek*, 18.

McGonigal, J. (2010, February). *Gaming can make a better world*. Lecture presented at TED Conference.

Me, myself, and my avatar. (2009, November 4). *New Scientist, 204*(2734), 19.

Oliver, M., & Carr, D. (2009, May). Learning in virtual worlds: Using communities of practice to explain how people learn from play. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 40*(3), 444-457.

Pinckard, J. (2006, April 25). World of Warcraft Is the New Golf. *PC Magazine, 25*(7), 108-109.

Sasaki, D. (2007, January 25). Chilean Senator Explores World of Warcraft: Scholastic Team Building or Time Wasting? In *Global Voices Online*. Retrieved from http://globalvoicesonline.org/2007/01/25/chilean-senator-explores-world-of-warcraft-scholastic-team-building-or-time-wasting/

Schiesel, S. (2005, November 5). GAME THEORY: THE GAMER; Finding Community in Virtual Town Squares. *New York Times*.

What is a MMORPG? (n.d.). *wiseGEEK*. Retrieved from http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-mmorpg.htm

Yee, N. (2003, February 11). Learning Leadership Skills. In *The Daedalus Project*. Retrieved from http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000338.php

Yee, N. (2005, March 13). In Their Own Words: The Social Component. In *The Daedalus Project*. Retrieved from http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001301.php?page=9

Yee, N. (2006, January 3). The labor of fun: How video games blur the boundaries of work and play. *Games and Culture, 1*, 68-71.

Yee, N. (2006, March 20). Life as a Guild Leader. In *The Daedalus Project*. Retrieved from http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001516.php