The Managed Hearthstone: Labor and Emotional Work in the Online Community of World of Warcraft

Andras Lukacs, David G. Embrick , and Talmadge Wright

Loyola University Chicago
alukacs@luc.edu,
dembrick@luc.edu,
twright@luc.edu

Abstract. Prior analyses of player interactions within massive multi-player online environments (MMOs) rely predominantly on understanding the environments as spheres of leisure—places to "escape" the stress of the "real world." We find in our research on the *World of Warcraft,* a popular online role-playing game suggests that, in fact, social interaction within the game more closely resembles work. Successful play requires dedicated participants who choose to engage in a highly structured and time-consuming "process" of game progression. Simultaneously, players must also actively engage in the "emotional labor" of acceptably maintaining standards of sociability and guild membership constructed by their gaming peers. We posit that these expectations of both structured progression work and emotional maintenance work significantly blur the existing lines between categorizing work and leisure. While the assumption of leisure shrouds the general expectation of gaming interaction, we suggest a "play as work" paradigm more clearly captures the reality of the demands of The World of Warcraft.

Keywords: emotional labor, work, video games, *World of Warcraft*, sociability, MMORPG, interaction patterns, social dynamics.

1 Introduction

2008 was an exceptionally successful year for the video game entertainment industry - despite the slumping global economy, freezing credit markets and plummeting oil prices, the total hardware, software and peripheral sales of the industry climbed to an annual $22 billion, entertainment software sales compromising $11.7 billion of the total revenue [1]. Sales in December exceeded $5 billion, partly due to the release of Blizzard's new expansion (*Wraith of the Lich King*) of the subscription-based massively multiplayer online *World of Warcraft* in late November. Within the first day of availability the expansion sold more than 2.8 million copies and the game was played by more than 11.5 million subscribers worldwide by the end of 2008 [2]. Recent research indicates that 40% of Americans and 83% of American teenagers are regular video game players. According to Williams et al., while stereotypical images of the isolated teenager boy gamers persist, the average player age is 33 years old and 1 in 4 users are women [3].

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Since the advent of the commercially available video games in the 1970s, technological advancement in hardware, software and communication technology have allowed game designers to transform gaming experience from simple hand/eye coordination-based single-player applications to persistent, multi-user three-dimensional virtual worlds. The most popular game spaces are persistent virtual realms, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs henceforth), such as the combat- based *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life* which is primarily a social environment. These games are vibrant sites of social and cultural production where regular and lasting social relationships develop [4]. In fact, a number of researchers argue that with the disappearance of public spaces, online game environments have became central sites of community building [5]. While the most popular MMOs are constant topics of media criticism and were analyzed from the standpoint of literally criticism, narrative analysis [6] and psychology [7], critical sociological investigations of game audiences are less frequent.

One of the first theories of persistent users was developed by Richard Bartle. In a 1996 article [8] he distinguished four types of players: achievers, socializers, explorers and killers. While these categories are useful to conceptualize ideal-type audience behaviors in virtual worlds, contemporary MMO players are omnivores, displaying a multitude of orientations towards the game at the same time. T.L. Taylor [9] categorizes players as casual and powergamers in the EverQuest game environment. In her definitions powergamers engage in instrumentally rational play to become as powerful as possible, often bordering on cheating. On the other hand, casual gamers are not as goal oriented but focus on building relationships.

While these categories could guide us to better understand the social dynamics of virtual realms, they are limited in that too much autonomy is given to players who are often viewed by researchers as playing such games in order to get away from the structural and ritualistic rigors of everyday life. We argue that while that approaches centered on escapism from the alienation and "disenchantment" of everyday life remains generally true, it is additionally true that online gaming also represents an extension of everyday life; often online environments are created in a way that replicates existing social structures. For example, though the trade system in *World of Warcraft* is one where players trade gold and silver for merchandise of interest, it is also very much a replica of the capitalist market system in which most of the players reside in real life. Similarly, while the dynamics of the game may be fantastic (e.g., playing avatars who represent elves, dwarves, etc.), how players socialize and interact with one another in the online environment often parallel how players socialize and interact with one another in the real world.

We would like to suggest a different metaphor to approach the experience of players: we suggest a new analytical model for understanding 21st century play that puts work at the center. Of course work has various meanings. For example, gold farming companies, like IGE.com marketing itself as the "leading MMORPG[1] Service Company", operate within game environments. Meanwhile, independent developers make essential modifications (mods) and add-ons for various games available at no cost [10]. Our metaphor of work is more inclusive: we are interested in the work of being

[1] MMORPG is the abbreviation of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, a subgenre of MMOs.

an active player within these persistent virtual worlds, in particular *World of Warcraf* - the organization of guilds, management of raiding and the emotional labor successful (and failed) gaming sessions require. Our central question is how do players rectify with the fact that what they think of as "play" sometimes becomes so structured and limited as to become confused with notions of "work".

2 Literature Review

While the social science literature on human play is not abundant, the importance of play did not escape the attention of many leading psychologists (e.g., Erikson [11], Freud [12], Piaget [13] or Csikszentmihalyi [14]). One of most important early game studies is Johan Huzinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play-Element in Culture* [15]. In the opening chapters of his book Huzinga uses the allegory of "magic circle" to define play as a voluntary, secluded and limited activity which is separate from ordinary life. While the magic circle offers a theoretical starting point for many scholars, it has been criticized for setting-up artificial boundaries between the "real world" and "play worlds" (e.g., Henricks [16]).

Juliet B. Schor in her brilliant book, *The Overworked American* [17], rejects the subjective categorical divide of work as unpleasant and mandatory and leisure as an enjoyable, discretionary activity. There are many problems with this approach: work can be enjoyable, in fact some people do not have to work, yet they decide to. Or, as Arlie Russell Hochschild [18] highlights, sometimes work can feel like home and home like work. To operationalize the distinction between work and leisure, Schor concentrates on defining the former as paid employment and household labor while the rest of human activity falls under the category of leisure. We contend that the available data from persistent virtual worlds suggests that this definition is inadequate to understand play and work in the 21st century: the boundaries between the two are more blurred than ever.

It has been suggested by scholars to approach virtual worlds from the standpoint of work. Nick Yee's short paper, *The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play* [19], argues that for many users gameplay is an obligation, it becomes a tedium and feels more like a second (or third) job than entertainment. Scott Rettberg maintains that gameplay subconsciously socializes players into a capitalist paradigm. The equation between work and play in MMOs is a sustained delusion that enables players to waste time without understanding, that in fact, they are acquiring skills upon which contemporary capitalism thrives: leadership, conflict management, managerial training and networking [20].

The organization of successful guilds and the management of raiding resemble traditional, Taylorist labor management practices. As Harry Braverman [21] points out in his classic work on labor, modern production is unimaginable without some form of direct control over the labor machine, which is broken down into multiple operations performed by different workers. The management and administrative apparatus controls the entire work process: the gathering of workers, length of the workday, enforcement of rules (talking, leaving, smoke breaks, etc.) and the mode of execution. Although Braverman's work is not without its shortcomings (it neglects workers resistance and places too much emphasis on Taylorism (Storey [22]), ultimately it

provides game researchers with a useful tool to understand the organization of social groups within persistent virtual worlds.

Citizens of MMOs not only experience and participate in the bureaucratic, work-like organizations of guilds and raid groups, but they also perform tremendous emotional labor, suppressing feelings (e.g., anger, frustration, anxiety, etc.) to sustain proper state of minds to continue the play session. Arlie Hochschild [23] believes that emotional work is part of the modern work process and the symbolic and often instrumental displaywork is inseparable from the structural understanding of the labor practice. The transmutation of emotion is the link between a private act of enjoying something and the public display of enjoyment regardless of state of mind. Indeed, *The Managed Heart* argues that transmutation is often unconscious and depends on three factors:

1. emotion work is performed to maintain team solidarity
2. feelings rules are not discretionary, but bureaucratically or textually controlled
3. social exchange is forced into narrow channels allowing limited display of individual emotional stances

Frequent rule reminders maintain the ongoing process of emotional labor, and while failed transmutations frequently remain invisible, when they do surface, they are often punished by management.

Based on our data, we maintain that modern play in persistent virtual realms smears the distinction between work and play; users perform both at the same time. The game structure establishes social organizations resembling Taylorist management and control practices. Further, successful play depends on emotion management and emotional labor. If the displaywork fails, gaming sessions often come to a sudden halt, while failed management of the play-work encounter could lead to the break-up of larger social structures, guilds. Some players attempt to escape the work aspect of the game, yet there is little room for resistance – only through the rejection of the game can people escape. However, the deeper question is whether working and playing at the same time is something we need to escape at all.

3 Methodology

The data for our study come from ethnographic observations of player social interactions on four North American servers (henceforth referred to as Hearthstone) in *World of Warcraft.* Since we are specifically interested in "how" online players navigate an environment where work and leisure are blurred, the qualitative approach of Marshall and Rossman [24] is "uniquely suited" to answer questions that require researchers to probe deeper than traditional survey methods might allow. More specifically, we employ critical ethnography in order to best address and acknowledge the role of media institutions—including online gaming environments—in reproducing and reinforcing race, gender, class, and other social inequalities (see Anderson [25], Anderson and Herr [26], and Marshal [27]).

To best understand the nature of play and work in multiple multi-user online game environments and explore whether players across different servers had similar experiences about work and leisure, we logged more than 150 days of playing time in

the *World of Warcraft* on different US game servers. We recorded data both on the Horde and Alliance side, playing in Player-Versus-Environment (PVE) and Player-Versus-Player (PVP) settings and experiencing Role Playing situations on RP servers. We went through the process of grinding eighty levels multiple times, raided end-game instances, entered Arenas and Battlegrounds with our comrades, developed social networks through our guild affiliations, experienced tensions, frustrations, boredom, success and pleasure during our sessions.

We collected most of the data used in this paper while playing end-game content, 10 and 25 man raid instances[2]. Throughout these gaming sessions we took screenshots of noteworthy chat discussions, sketched notes and used voice recording software to capture relevant conversations, because typed chat communication is usually limited when voice chat is used by players to coordinate their activities. While self-critical, self-conscious and self-reflective about our methodology, we believe that our critical ethnography "reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold" (Fine [28], 290) to approach the idiosyncratic, mundane and taken for granted events in virtual realms with such methodological vigor.

We complemented our participant observation with eight informal interviews taking place in the game. We used snowball sampling and ended up with 5 male and 3 female respondents. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour. We understand that the this small sample does not provide an accurate representation of the larger Hearthstone population, yet as critical field workers we maintain that language and discourse are essential to understand the lived experience of players, thus we reject scientific positivism [29]. We asked fellow players about their game experience, about guild life in general, their struggles to find time to raid, the process of raiding and the frustration and pleasure of being a citizen of Azeroth[3].

After the data from the participant observations and interviews were transcribed, one of the authors read all of the material to extract common themes and patterns. The findings were then coded in a two-stage process following the "grounded theory model" (see Glaser and Strauss [30]).

4 Analysis

4.1 Leveling

A common idea among players of World of Warcraft is that while the leveling process is necessary and sometimes fun, the "game starts at level 80". Given the complexity of game mechanics and social interaction at end-game content, this is echoed by many players throughout Azeroth. During the last two years Blizzard introduced measures to ease the grind of leveling characters and reaching top levels faster: more experienced gained in lower levels, faster transportation methods (mounts) available earlier, items granting extra experience points while leveling or starting a special character class at level 55. Despite all these changes in the game design, leveling is still a tedious activity that could take up to 15-20 days of logged game time. Some people reject the notion that the ultimate playing experience is end-game content, as this male user described:

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[2] Raid instances are high level dungeons designed to provide challenge for experienced players.
[3] Azeroth is the name of the fantasy world players inhabit.

> *You will hear people saying that the game starts at level 70. That is plain ol' bs. If you are not having fun leveling, you should not play at all.*

Others only played with special low level characters, called twinks. These characters are extremely powerful and optimized for low level PvP Battlegrounds. Because twinks do not require leveling or further progression once created, players are able to participate with fewer time constraints and guild expectations. This transforms the game experience. Players who are looking for escape from the organizational and emotional work of end-game content but continue playing are often "twinking". However, it is worth noting that because of the expensive items twinks require, to create a successful character, one needs the help of some high level friends. In fact, creating these types of characters entail extremely careful planning and the most sophisticated leveling and gearing procedure one can imagine: twinks are the kings of instrumentally rational gameplay. As a female player described her transition from end-game content to twinks:

> *I play with twinks, because it is still fun. You can log on, play 30 min and log off. I don't even have a main*[4] *anymore. Getting raid ready and raid took up so much time.*

Nonetheless, the majority of users will go through the pressure-filled leveling process. The structure of the game only partially contributes to this pressure. The main sources are social pressures: players trying to level fast and keep-up with their friends and guild members. Given the multiplicity of add-ons and helper applications available to support players through the leveling process, even users who log similar amounts of hours could find themselves at different levels, and thus, unable to play together. As one guild members shouted out in guild chat:

> *Hey Raya! You level so freaking fast. I keep grinding so we can quest together, but you are always ahead of me.*

On the other hand, guilds sometimes ask players to level faster so certain positions in the raids could be filled. In extreme cases these expectations require 12-15 hours of playtime a day. In this instance a guild needed a level 80 druid:

> *Ennui: Elwis, I need a druid tank by Saturday.*
> *Elwis: You are only giving me 3 days to hit 80? I am halfway to 74.*
> *Flex: I doubt you can do it.*
> *Elwis: I'll do my best. I can manage 3 levels a day. Maybe. If I don't get bored >.<*
> *Ynn: How the hell does one do 2-3 levels in one day?*

Of course, occasionally, these requests and goals are unobtainable, yet the pressure still exists. During our efforts to level characters in the game, we experienced tensions among players and the break-up of leveling guilds due to social pressures[5]:

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[4] A high level character, usually the most powerful character of a player.

[5] Leveling guilds usually have few high level characters. There are guilds mostly focusing on end-game content without rejecting lower level characters (casual raiding guilds) and hardcore raiding guilds. The latter require not-only max level characters, but experienced, extremely powerful and committed players. Of course the variety of guilds are enormous (PvP, Role Playing, Twink Guilds for instance), yet the above three are the most common.

[Poople has left the guild]
Zuul: What the hell is that all about? He was one of the guild leaders.
Klothor: Probably can't stand the pressures of leveling ☺

[Later Poople explained his decision to leave in a private chat]
Poople: Me and Mik has moved to my sis' old guild (very small but no pressure). You are welcomed to join.
[Days after the exodus of players, the original guild disbanded]

Because similar level characters usually play together, leveling guilds have a tendency to develop small cliques, alienating higher or lower level players. This causes low social solidarity on the guild level due to the lack of exposure and common goals. This is one of the reasons leveling guilds have a tremendous turnover and players reaching the maximum level often leave to join more organized groups aimed at exploring end-game content.

At the end of the leveling process, when the final "ding" comes, players announce their achievement through guild or public channels, drawing mechanical congratulations – in fact some players have a macro button on their action bar congratulating others, so they do not need to type:

There are some many freaking achievements and new levels. This is so easy now. I just push the gratz (sic) button and can go about my business.

While reaching level 80 is a huge milestone in the game, to experience end-game content, players must engage in reputation grinding, gold and gear farming just to be powerful enough to step inside a raiding instance or rated Arena battleground.

4.2 End-Game

Players reaching the maximum level do not gain any more experience points, instead the aim of the game becomes raiding or player versus player battle. Both require tremendous team effort and organization, and while the following data is focusing on the management and emotional labor of participating in guild organized raids, PvP teams are assembled in similar ways and experience the same problems. Nick Yee's *Dragon Slaying 101: Understanding the Complexity of Raids* [31] is a great point of entry to grasp the various problems raids experience: mobilization, management, communication, ground rules, knowledge and expertise are the most important variables upon which successful raiding session depend.

The first step in the process of raiding is to have a knowledgeable raid leader, who extensively studies the raid instance, have knowledge of all the challenges ahead, understands the mechanics of all the classes in the game, have great communication skills and able to manage and coordinate 10 or 25 people throughout the entire raiding sessions, which can take anywhere from 45 minutes to 12 hours. This is a huge commitment usually shouldered by guild officers who become raid leaders.

Members of the raiding group are carefully selected given the division of labor within the raid. Various tasks are divided among participants: the leader designates tanks, melee classes, healers, ranged damage etc. Since there are limited spots available to participate, selection is a point of contestation within guilds, sometimes leading to internal guild problems:

Juki: I will leave the guild. I'm sick and tired of planning to raid on Thursday night, organize my whole life around it - just to be demoted as an alternative.
Vigi: Sorry man, we already have a hunter in the group. Maybe next week.
Juki: No hard feelings, but I want to raid. Bye.
[Juki leaves the guild]

Other players leave guilds not because they are not invited to raid, but because the guild is not organized enough to conduct raids:

Kasa: would you guys be mad if I lefted (sic)?
Homaru: /cry
Spralio: not me, but why?
Kasa: lol
Kasa: [Guild] is looking for healers for Kara[6]*...and even though I'm not geared for Kara yet they said I can still run with them*
Kasa: and I do want good gear...so I think thats the best way for me to get it.
Spralio: go for it
Kasa: since we rarely ever run anything here lol.

Players usually complete daily repeatable quests gaining money and reputation to be able to purchase essential items required to participate in a raid: magic potions and elixirs, weapons, reagents for spells, etc. Money is also needed to repair damaged equipment before, during and after the raid encounter. Raiding is expensive and unprepared players can ruin the experience of 10 or 25 other players participating in the raid. For this reason, guilds often lay down ground rules for the minimum requirement to join a raid. For instance, the following is part of a casual raiding guild's rules:

1. Once a raid is formed and the group is set the raid leader will give an indication of when we will begin.
2. You are expected to already have all of the potions, reagents and buff food you will need for at least four hours of raiding.
3. Every raid member is responsible for their own reagents, potions, etc.; these will not be provided by the guild, and you are expected to have them.
4. Anyone not present, away from keyboard or ill prepared come time to begin will be replaced.

People not having enough money, adequate equipment or supplies are a common cause of friction during play sessions. While players often do not vocalize their disapproval of unprepared teammates, thus performing emotional labor, sometimes these transmutations fail:

How come you don't have money for repair and pots? I mean, don't you do your dailies???

Most players, who have finished the leveling process, make an effort to complete some daily quests during their playing sessions to make some money. One player can complete 25 daily quests every day, and it is not uncommon to see players logging in only to complete some of them in order to be ready to raid in the future:

[6] An entry level instance when the level cap was 70.

> *Man, these dailies are so freaking boring. I don't have time to play, so I just log to do them before I go to bed so I have money*

During raids leaders monitor players' by using third party add-on software, such as *Recount*, which reports data on the work performed by each individual – not unlike various supervisory applications in work environments (For a longer discussion of monitoring performance, see Taylor [32]) . Communication is often through VOIP (voice over IP) software, because typing in traditional chat slows down the raid progression and does not allow quick commands when plan modifications are necessary during an encounter. However, most guilds restrict the use of the voice channel to the raid leader and select officers. Players are expected to leave their computers only during designated breaks. The use of technology to completely monitor performance, restricted communication and control of break time clearly resemble the Taylorist organization of work discussed by Braverman. For someone who is not playing the game, this sounds restrictive. However, players usually do not resist the organization of raids; this is the most effective way to achieve the goal which is to defeat bosses in the instance and upgrade one's equipment from the looted goods.

While the distribution of acquired goods is often highly structural (for instance raid members with immaculate attendance history receiving priority over more casual raid members), loot distribution is also primary example of emotional transmutation within *World of Warcraft.* Guild and raid rules often control emotional display, thus players are discouraged from excess chatting during the process. Players encourage positive emotional display (however mechanical it might be). Congratulations are an expected response to new equipment /items received from the raid leader[7]. One could argue that this maintains group solidarity. On the other hand, the display of disapproval is often forbidden as this guild memo demonstrates:

> *If you want to continue to raid with [Guild], be a pleasant person to have in a raid. Don't forget the primary reason to be there is for the fun and challenge, the loot is a bonus. By joining any of our raids, you accept our looting policy and any disputes should be addressed in private chat after the raid. If you have any issues during the raid, suck it up!*

Most guilds attempt to establish a steady raid schedule during the week so members can coordinate their life and make raids. However, for raid leaders the pressure of showing up ready to deal with the demands of managing a large group of people is enormous. The play experience starts to shift towards an obligation, as this female player explained:

> *I mean I never have fun anymore. I used to. But it is so repetitive and the drama. I'm not even a raid leader anymore - it was frustrating. People not showing up on time and stuff. Drama before, during and after the raid. People not listening. So yea, it totally feels like work. Especially on my main. One of the reasons I started leveling this shaman is to escape that. Yea,[she] is fun.*

[7] Raid leaders are usually the designated Master Looters controlling the distribution of acquired items.

Besides the emotional burnout, players reported that the time intensiveness of participating in end-game raiding (the third shift) interfered with their work (first shift) or family obligations (second shift):

> *"I left [guild]. I just got a baby and was unable to make the raid times regularly. Kind of sucks - I had a lot of friends in the guild, but I cannot play with them, unless I make the raids. […] Pretty funny actually: I used to not get sleep because of raiding. Now I haven't slept since Wednesday [three days] because of the baby"*

In extreme cases, the demands of being a citizen of Azeroth is so overwhelming and the grinding, labor and repetitiveness of playing becomes such a burden that players actually leave the game. This is a further example of emotional labor for people leaving and remaining in the game as well:

> *Mak: Anywho, I'm just not enjoying wow any more. I mean im sitting at the bottom of SW [the abbreviation of a city] cannal (sic) for the past 20 mins*
> *Fish [Guild Leader]: ☹ Sorry to hear that*
> *Mak: It's like absolutely 0 fun, so I'm leaving, not worth my money. The 19th is my last day before my next pay period [when the players' subscription expire]. I'm sure you'll all live.*
> *Oghan : OMG*
> *Oghan: NOOOOO*
> *Mak: YEEES*
> *Acker: What are you doing with your account?*
> *Mak: Either keeping or selling.*
> *Oghan: I buy it with ingame gold. Lol.*
> *Mak: %~&} that! Cash only, no imaginary $*!^!*
> *Fish: Don't worry Mak, I will get you to have fun again.*
> *Mak: doubtful.*
> *Fish: If you are leaving, leave me ur accounts and ill lvl u to 80.*
> *Mak: And it's not even leveling, it's just the whole game.*
> *Elwis [logging on]: who is leaving?*
> *Mak: me*
> *Elwis: nooooooooo not my bestest best friend*
> *Feron: Why is wow no longer fun Mak?*
> *Mak: Quests are all the same, bosses are all the same, pvp is the same. It's just old.*

Thus, the journey in a virtual world which is designed to have infinite possibilities comes to end. No matter how many new continents, quests or raid dungeons are introduced, the basic game mechanic is static. A player performs work to be able to experience end-game content, work to be ready to raid, perform emotional labor to mitigate conflict within the guild and during raids, than start it over again. Maybe play continues with a different character, maybe on a different realm or even a different game. Of course, one can always return: the characters are waiting to be resurrected through a monthly payment of $14.99.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the inadequacy of analytic models that rely on a work/leisure dichotomy within persistent multiuser online game environments. While players' narratives and vocabularies might not always frame game participation in terms of work, our ethnographic data and follow-up interviews revealed that the metaphor of labor is, indeed, useful at understanding user experiences within virtual realms. While previous research suggests that different game servers, especially in Europe (Taylor [32]) show considerable variability, we did not find any significant cross-server differences regarding labor and emotional work.

We showed that the leveling process is not only a source of fun, but also progression of work toward a final goal. Players join guilds during their leveling for help, support and community. Yet membership in these groups is exceedingly unstable. End-game guilds are organized more hierarchically. Guild raids demonstrate more thorough regulation of labor; the process of control is key in successful groups. Guild officers and raid leaders often possess the technical skill and game expertise to control the play session with help from various add-ons to monitor individual performance, which is broken down into particular tasks. Group play is controlled through textual codes and unwritten customs: the length of the encounter, communication and breaks are regulated. Players are expected to do their "homework" by spending considerable time preparing for these gaming sessions.

Conflict within guilds and raid groups is inevitable, yet it is kept under control through the process of emotional labor. Management of feelings is an essential part of participating, which explains the taxing nature of online play. Emotional transmutations are expected from the players to maintain solidarity and avoid conflict. However, sometimes these transmutations fail causing frustration and frictions. The symbiotic relationship of the mechanical structure of play and the emotional investment of guild members ensures success. Either the breakdown of the work process or the displaywork could lead to an abrupt end of the play session, break-up of guilds or players leaving end-game content or the game environment altogether.

We maintain that modern virtual realms are simultaneously play and work environments: to make the distinction between the two is counter productive. The blurring boundaries between work and play raise interesting questions not only about the nature of gaming in the 21st century, but also about the nature of work and its changing relationship to leisure. In his speculative nonfiction, Edward Castronova [33] proposes that virtual worlds will in fact change the workplace: people would expect smaller immediate rewards for their work, established authority structures would be challenged and replaced by voluntary team effort. Obviously, these are ongoing processes in certain middle-class professions [34]. Yet, we are extremely skeptical that participation in online virtual environments alone will pose a significant threat to established stratification systems. Further research is required to fully understand the underlying mechanisms.

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