World of Warcraft:

Fun or Hard Work?

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Have you ever called someone lazy for watching television or playing videogames? Have

you ever been called lazy for doing these things? Well, how about picking up a hobby that is

both entertaining and stimulating? Sounds like some cheap gimmick doesn't it? Guess again. A

wave of new studies has hit the market and the word is out, massive multiplayer online role-

playing games provide unique insights into leadership styles and practice models.

Management fads and business leadership books come and go. But the Internet, and the

changes it is forcing upon business managers, is here to stay. The days of closely knit teams

working on long-term strategy in close quarters are gone, replaced by virtual teams that

constantly reinvent the business in multiple time zones around the globe. The business world is

in desperate need of a new model for leadership befitting this interactive era. In the realm of

online games, specifically massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs),

leaders emerge that deftly navigate the motivational, emotional, and social needs of players in a

highly competitive, distributed, virtual environment. And there are many lessons to be learned.

Not only this, but many teenagers also receive unprecedented opportunities to lead a team

that would be impossible in our molded, social structure. Some of the most successful guilds and

parties are lead by youth as young as fifteen or sixteen years old (Ravenhawk). Even younger

teenagers have the ability to try their hand in leadership throughout the gaming environment. The

same reasons that allow games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest* to be useful tools for

building corporate leadership skills, allow youth to innovate and explore their own potential. The

use of avatars in these online games makes leadership easier to assume because there is less

personal impact to the player (Roy 22). Leadership in online games is more temporary and

flexible than it is in the real world and, finally, online games give leaders the freedom to fail, and experiment with different approaches and techniques.

In the context of work, there are multiple similarities that link the gaming world and the business realm. Especially relevant in today's global workforce, companies often collaborate across nations, incorporating a large team of participants that must work together in a virtual setting. This work team must be able to self-organize, develop necessary skills to complete the task, and take on changing roles to best accomplish a defined goal (Robbins & DeCenzo 261). What model could be any closer than *World of Warcraft*? Players from across multiple borders work together on a regular basis to successfully take on anything from quests to battlegrounds. In fact, these, often short-lived groups, will delegate responsibilities and establish versatile role positions that can be swapped in an instant to benefit the outcome of the team.

This form of cooperation is entirely relevant to all walks of life. Schools will require group projects; teenagers will lead clubs, sports teams, or even loose social relations. All of these tasks are common forms of management that are practiced on a daily basis. However, in the real world, many people – men, women, adults, and children – find that leading is both difficult and scary. Anxiety builds up over the fear of failure and people back down and lose their opportunity (Beebe 49). Why? Lets again look at the idea of videogame leadership. A leader can be anyone. Through the fictional image of an avatar, players are able to take risks because they know that failure will not have any permanent affect on their lives. This environment permits constant risk taking, ushering in innovation through repetition and quite possibly, failure. This ability to improve without fear of major repercussion provides incentives that are clearly linked to the concept that "practice makes perfect."

In a 2007 report by IBM, the corporation established four principle factors that it determined to be "important leadership tools and capabilities" (DeMarco & Lesser 5). Through the support of a communication consulting group, Seriousity Inc., the technology corporation analyzed the possibility that games may affect leadership performance at the corporate level (Roy 19). The four factors that it determined to be important to leaders were: vision, evaluation, collaboration, and execution.

Vision pertains to the idea of creating a compelling vision of new possibilities, expressing confidence in one's own abilities and experience, and setting high expectations and sustainability through commitment (DeMarco & Lesser 7). If you are an avid gamer you know that there is certainly no lack of vision within MMORPGs. Roles, or characters, can become alternate lives for some gamers. Quests, battles, status, prestige, armor, weapons, and obtaining the maximum level are all aspects that drive players to work endlessly within the virtual world. For instance, *World of Warcraft* support and fan sites plague the internet. Thotbot.com, Allakhazam.com, mapWoW.com, and ubiquitous leveling or questing guides represent countless hours that have been poured into researching the game. There are even mathematical algorithms to determine which builds and what equipment will be best for what situations. All of this culminates into the vision of being the best that a player can become.

Evaluating massive amounts of information, validating individual ability, and supporting the sharing of resources are deemed to be the next key qualities required by IBM leaders. Although some people are naturally endowed with an "intuition" of sorts, management of information and human resources are often skills developed from continuous and endless practice. The more these skills are used the more honed they become. In the hyper environment of MMORPGs players are forced to work within team environments all the time (Reeves,

Malone, & O'Driscoll 6). In some games, such as *Final Fantasy XI*, there are very few options for single players to achieve their goals without a supporting party. Because of this reliance on team cooperation, games give players access to an unprecedented amount of real-time information, from equipment to statistics or rank. In this way, group leaders can decide who would be best used in each situation. All of this information is assessed so often, that, identification and evaluation becomes second nature to players and potential leaders.

The ability to evaluate effectively leads into the aspect of execution. Because of the availability of large, accurate amounts of information, players learn the importance of decision-making and how to translate goals into manageable pieces that each member of the group must complete to contribute to the whole group (DeMarco & Lesser 7). While driving decisions these leaders must be able to monitor and organize their leadership to adapt to individual needs. Because online leadership is usually assumed – not authorized or delegated – leaders must develop incentives for others to follow.

This focus on collaboration is the final factor in what IBM deems to be effective leadership behavior. By creating and maintaining relationships through understanding why people act and react in the manner that they do causes a commitment to form and supports consistency. If the leader recognizes that another player can better complete a task then they will automatically withdrawal from their "position" to let the other, more experienced, player to naturally fill the gap. This process is revolutionary and unheard of in the business process. Normally, a leader is "identified early" and nurtured through the ranks (Robbins & DeCenzo 263). However, this process is inflexible and leads to a lack of full potential as well as follower dissatisfaction. The Global Innovation Report 2.0 suggests that the current measure that can help alleviate this tension is "project-oriented organization" to help change up management and base

leadership on experience per situation. This *does* increase business flexibility, but it does not, necessarily, mean that all team members will utilize their leadership potential even if they *do* have an innovative idea or better solution.

Even if people did take the risk of leading in the current business environment, it is unlikely that their managers would feel the same way about failure compared to the MMORPG environment. The "score" seems to be permanently engrained upon the work record and haunts you throughout your career or may even result in getting "fired" as in the recently popular show *The Apprentice*. Unfortunately, even when there is so much to be learned from the safety net of the virtual leadership role, it is often set aside as fun and games. One blogger states,

> "I learned a lot about leadership and managing people while playing and running a MUD, and now in WoW, but, unlike being the captain of a casual sports team or a member of a real life club, mentioning this to a potential employer only gets me funny looks" (Thomas).

So, maybe the game world has not been thoroughly accepted yet, let alone in the business world. But, this does not deny the fact that thousands of gamers are finding never before seen opportunities to hone their skills on a daily basis and have fun doing it! While individuals and teenagers may privately benefit from their experience on MMORPGs, it does not seem that most companies and corporate employees will soon take the plunge into leadership trials in a similar mentality.

Why? Simple. Fear is a huge problem in practicing leadership. Both within the corporate sphere and the realm of society, leadership brings burdens and responsibility as well as the possibility of failure. Many people look at failure as an end-all action (Beebe 46). However, if the famous Thomas Edison taught us anything about failure, it was that it moves us forward and

spurs innovation. If it was not for light, you would probably not be reading this paper right now and I most certainly could not have written it! The message is not to go forth and fail, but to go forth and try. If you fail, you pick yourself up, and try something new. And, if it suits you better, go practice in *World of Warcraft*. Certainly your death in Elwynn Forest will not scar you for life, but you may just find that you will grow and learn from your experiences and, maybe, just maybe, you will develop into a skilled leader.

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