# The Emotional Work of Family Negotiations in Digital Play Space
## Searching for Identity, Cooperation, and Enduring Conflict

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Computer game play has been criticized for disrupting family life by some who claim digital fantasy play alienates individuals from everyday interactions, even as others hold that such play increases sociability among players and their families. The authors argue that the truth about game play is more complex. They draw on research using participant observations and interviews with players about a well-known massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* and examine the struggle within families about time spent playing, family responsibilities, enhanced family dynamics, and the distances created by game playing. **Key words**: family play; game play and work; massive multiplayer online games; massive multiplayer online role-playing games; virtual environments

## Introduction

Social scientists have long grappled with questions about game play—especially role-playing games, first tabletop and more recently online computer games—and identity. Although the myth of the lonely individual game player persists in the public imagination, the real environment for modern digital play (vis-à-vis or separate from popular social media sites) is far more social than many of its critics imagined (Lenhart et al. 2008; Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2002). Aside from the obvious network connections made through Facebook, Linked-In, YouTube, Twitter, and other forms of social media, the involvement of game playing fans in online competitions or exploring simulated fantasy worlds has expanded to include individuals, of all ages and from all walks of life and families. Moreover, new social networks have developed, and new types of social skills are required to assess both the truthfulness and manner of expressing comments by online players in different messaging forums.

Considered a subset of online social media, the simulated digital worlds of massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORGPs), specifically *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), form online universes where one can immerse oneself in a variety of activities both socially or alone. How do families negotiate conflict and cooperation both within and outside these online simulated environments? What are the issues families struggle with between game-playing members and nongame members? Further, how do families negotiate relationships among themselves and others when they engage with strangers in a virtual environment? These questions guided our research as we sought to understand the complex ways that simulated play worlds provide a public space in which families tackle conflicts, both person- ally and socially, as well as discover new forms of cooperation and feelings of accomplishments.

Although many have viewed video and computer games simply as a form of entertainment or play, as opposed to work, we argue that in fact such play consti- tutes a great deal of work. Indeed, we see it as a specific form of work, emotional work (Hochschild 1983; Lukacs, Embrick, and Wright 2010; see also Embrick, Wright, and Lukacs 2012) during which game players and their families engage in symbolic actions that maintain both online and offline social relationships. This often demands long hours of play for gamers, participating in dungeon runs or conducting raids with other online players. By "dungeon runs" and "raids," we are referring to group-oriented play within MMORPGs whereby players are forced to cooperate, negotiate, and play as a team to complete a mission or task within the game. Such time demands can easily become a source of conflict within families. In addition, differences in technical skills, social roles within the family, and a host of other variables can become a source of either irritation or of relief for couples and for those engaged in adult-child interactions.

## Social Reality as a Continuous Process

We rely on Herbert Blumer's (1998) ideas in *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspec- tive and Method* about symbolic interaction to better understand how people interpret their actions within a given social context. In today's virtual environ- ments, reality sometimes becomes obscured by personal interactions based on a virtual presentation of self—in addition to (or as opposed to) a more physical presentation of self. Thus, those playing characters online may not only mask

their attitudes and tones of voice (through in-game texts or chats), they may also obscure their ages, ethnicities, and genders, characteristics that typically inform our perceptions of others and affect how we interact with them.

Blumer's central argument—that social reality (or perceptions of social reality) is created through a continuous process of interactions and interpretations—becomes heightened and exacerbated in virtual gaming environments where individuals must not only navigate their "real" lives but must also navigate their interactions with players whose behaviors may be even more unpredictable online. Thus, many players find themselves caught between the proverbial rock (i.e., reality) and a hard place (i.e., virtual reality) when negotiating their identities and their interactions in the real and virtual worlds. This means that players must pay closer attention than normal to interaction rituals because the process involved in interpreting and understanding other players grows even more nuanced and complex in virtual environments. Contrary to the expectations of digital utopians, players appear to manage this tension by resorting to well-established methods of interpreting the behavior of others, using their off-line skills in these virtual worlds. And, in turn, the playing of fantasy characters changes how these same players perceive both themselves and others—the Proteus Paradox, according to Nick Yee (2014). Players must be especially alert when they negotiate the family life that may take place within these virtual landscapes because more and more families these days play and work together online.

## Online Gaming as Social—or Antisocial

Social-science research on families and virtual game play falls into two camps. In one camp stand scholars and academicians who argue that increased access to technology and use of online games may have negative effects on gamers' social skills or their ability to interact with others in the real world (Gentile 2009; Fischer 1994; see also Putnam 2001 for a lengthy diatribe on the decline in Americans' social ties), their cognitive development or their ability to concentrate in school (Gentile 2009; Young 1998), and their ability to develop close, positively functioning relationships with family members (Putnam 2001; Kutner et al. 2008). Although slight variations affect how scholars perceive the outcomes of technologically mediated play, their arguments boil down to an assumption that increasingly these types of play alienate families and create stress for fam-

ily members, especially children. In one study, Gentile (2009) differentiated between gamers he labeled as "pathological" and those he labeled as "non-pathological." According to Gentile, pathological gamers proved much more prone to have troubled social issues. They more often did poorly in school and suffered attention problems. Uniquely at the time, Gentile's study used a nationally representative sample (as opposed to a convenience sample), and his findings that pathological gamers (as opposed to nonpathological gamers) spent twice as much time playing video games and more often became addicted to them provided fodder for those who already considered video games to blame for many of society's ills. However, Gentile's study never suggested that video games were the cause of gamers' obsession. In fact, he freely admitted the correlational nature of the study as a primary limitation—that it is equally likely children who already have problems at school or other social anxieties may find that playing games allows them to deal or escape from those troubles. Nevertheless, the research about game addiction, violent representations, and family problems over the last several decades or so has caused many parents and other individuals to be concerned with the impact of video games on children's lives (Andersen, Gentile, and Buckley 2007; Kutner et al. 2008). In some cases, this concern has bordered on hysteria when media reports appear to link video game use and violence, even though the empirical research is flawed at best (Ferguson 2008).

Other scholars, such as Robert D. Putnam, have suggested that the increased use of technology has allowed many families to escape from traditional family-bonding events by encouraging more individual than social play. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam (2001) advances his "bowling alone" thesis suggesting that, whereas in the past many individuals were tied together by institutional activities (e.g., bowling leagues, PTA events, church attendance), currently they are more content to be by themselves. Although Putnam blames many sources for the woes in our society (e.g., women entering into the workforce, high divorce rates), he also sees the advancement of technology and its role in helping create and shape various forms of play as one of the culprits working to alienate families.

Sherry Turkle (1997, 2011, 2015) points out the complex ways in which digital media, games included, preoccupy us at the expense of greater social intimacy with others. Her sample, mostly drawn from what appears to be privileged or wealthy families and their children, raises questions about the relevance of such a view in a world deeply divided by social class. Such assertions as hers beg

the question about the value of other social factors (such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual inequality), feelings of general powerlessness under globalized capitalism, and dysfunctional families trying to cope with the loss of security in the modern world. In *Reclaiming Conversation,* she argues that we spend too much time looking at our screens and not enough time in open conversations. Her assumption that face-to-face conversations are ideal constitutes an interpretation she assembles from her in-depth interviews. And yet she does not give enough weight in these interviews to nontechnological factors, which can disrupt or interfere with conversations as easily as the simple use of technology. The notion that we once somehow existed in a free and open discourse before the rise of cell phones, social media, and gaming platforms ignores a whole set of social problems that restricted communication long before even the telephone was introduced.

Contrary to these researchers, other scholars argue that vastly improved Internet, gaming, and communications technology has allowed many gamers and their families to engage fully their growing and increasingly global circle of networks at a rate never before seen (Buckingham 2007; Klinenberg 2012; Marsh et al. 2007; Wright 2012). Indeed, these researchers suggest that contrary to popular assumptions, current technology has allowed many families to take advantage of various forms of social media outlets—including MMOGs and MMORPGs—as they engage in social interactions that range from everyday attempts at creating and maintaining social cohesion among family members to large-scale civic events (Coyne et al. 2010; Lenhart et al. 2008a; The Entertainment Software Association 2012, 2017; see also Fischer 2011 for an alternative view to Robert Putnam's view on contemporary American life). In many instances, online game play actually fosters civic and political engagement. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the only instances of gamers becoming less communicative than their nongamer counterparts involves text messaging. Daily gamers are slightly less likely to send or receive text messages as a way to communicate with their social networks. Not only are game players more social in some respects in comparison to nongamers, they often have more ways to express themselves—through blog posts, online forums and discussion boards, internet posts of game reviews or walk-throughs, and even through the games themselves via instant messaging or the use of real-time chat headsets. MMOG players, in particular, are much more likely to connect with other players online (Lenhart et al. 2008; Subrahmanyam, et.al 2000; 2001). And as Sinem Siyahhan and Elisabeth Gee (2018) argue in *Families at Play:*

*Connecting and Learning through Video Games*, far from being alienating, social media and gaming in fact draw families closer together and provide additional forms of communication otherwise not available to them. We found this clearly true with how players used *World of Warcraft*.

Other scholars, such as Claude Fischer (2011), have purposely discarded research that argues American life has increasingly become alienated. In *Still Connected: Family and Friends in America since 1970*, Fischer argues that—contrary to Putnam's bowling alone thesis and other similar reports—Americans have willingly adapted to changing technology to allow them to connect or sustain their social ties. Just as parents spend more time eating out with their children rather than at home, more and more families now keep in touch online. Fischer's work has been complemented by that of Eric Klinenberg (2012), who argues against the notion that living alone is a purely solitary affair, demonstrating that it can also include living at a distance from families, relatives, and friends and choosing a life of greater autonomy.

There are a few scholars who might fit into yet a third camp—those who argue that positive and negative effects of gaming depend on factors such as the gender of the gamer, type of game played (e.g., racing, combat), and type of gaming hardware used (e.g., console, computer, portable device). In many of these cases, however, researchers have switched from a negative viewpoint of game play to a more positive one as new data has emerged on gamers' patterns of play and interaction. Nick Yee (2002), for example, changed his understanding of MMORPG addiction and argued that "addiction" was a mislabel for what current gamers experience. According to Yee (2014), recent findings support the holistic and player-centric approach to online gaming.

## Do Families Play Together?

Current research suggests that families play together more today than in the past. Although this may seem strange because we do not imagine families sitting together after lunch or dinner to play board games the way they once did, today's internet and computer technology does indeed allow families to be much more flexible about how family members interact socially. Take, for example, the game *Words with Friends*. This Scrabble-facsimile game has been reproduced digitally to allow individuals from all over the globe to play with one another over any phone, computer, or tablet device at any time of the day. Family members, even

extended family members such as cousins, nephews and nieces, can play with one another no matter where they are on the globe or what time zone they are in. A unique feature of *Words with Friends*, although one increasingly less rare, involves its integrated messaging function, which allows players to communicate virtually in a manner similar to texting. Thus, family members can not only play with one another, they can also keep in touch with one another over long distances in a way not possible twenty years ago.

Increasingly, parents play online games with their children. According to The Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart et al. 2008), 31 percent of parents claim they sometimes or always play games with their children. Although the Pew study reports that, of this number, relatively few parents regularly play games with their children, other data suggest that the number is quickly growing. The Entertainment Software Association (2012) reported a higher figure. According to its 2012 "Essential Facts" report, 40 percent of parents report playing games with their children at least weekly. Further, 90 percent of parents report that they play games with their children because doing so is fun for the entire family. In a more recent survey of four thousand households, the Entertainment Software Association's (2017) "Essential Facts" documents that 67 percent of parents now play video games with their children at least once a week and that 71 percent believe video games positively affect their children's lives. And it was not a male only playing field, far from it—adult women represented a larger percentage of the video game–playing population at 31 percent compared to boys under eighteen, who represented 18 percent of the respondents. Significantly the gaming population is aging: the average age of video game players is now thirty-five years and gamers over eighteen represent 72 percent of the video–game playing population.

## Which Families Are We Talking about?
## Sampling Players

To examine how families play together and the impact such play had on couple relationships and family conflict, we engaged in a four-year project examining in-depth the social relationships built up through a MMORPG. Participant observation and interview data on the MMORPG game, *World of Warcraft*, was collected by J. Talmadge Wright between October 2008 and December 2011.

Over eight thousand hours were logged playing on five different servers,

including servers dedicated to player versus environment (PVE) play, player versus player (PVP) play, and role playing (RP). The terms "server" and "realm" are often used interchangeably in *World of Warcraft*. A realm is defined as a virtual space that hosts players. Each realm is hosted on a separate physical computer device called servers. As of June 15, 2012, there were 241 total realms in North America. In Europe, there were 263 realms that can be broken down by the following languages: 109 English, 87 German, 37 French, 11 Spanish, and 19 Russian.

We took detailed field notes documenting social interactions in various virtual arenas that included computer screenshots of instant messages. In addition, we conducted twenty-nine in-game interviews using a snowball sample technique from members of five different guilds. Guilds are defined in *World of Warcraft* as an in-game association of players who group together for purposes of gaining benefits that range from enhanced social gameplay experiences to free gameplay items, skills, or other game rewards. We then developed the interview questions after noting patterns of interaction through the participant observation fieldwork. One interviewee, however, was not a game player but married to one who wanted to express her opinion about her husband's activity. Each interview lasted between forty-five and fifty-five minutes and was collected in game via either Skype or Ventrillo, and in-game software communication programs. Two interviews were conducted via text chat and recorded on screenshots within the game that was then transcribed and coded. All interviews were transcribed and double coded with another researcher, and patterns of responses were noted. In our sample of *WoW* data, out of twenty-nine participants, eight respondents indicated that they were involved in serious relationships, and eight others noted they were married (one participant refused to state a relationship status). The other respondents remarked that they were either single or divorced.

A point of interest in our sample of *WoW* players was the overwhelming nature of what we would consider working-class occupations. Occupations included nursing assistant, retail clerk, cook, computer consultant, waiter, housewife, manufacturing assembler, law enforcement, hairdresser, gas station attendant, miner, truck driver, project manager, purchasing agent, heavy equipment operator, restaurant manager, estimator, college students, plus the disabled and unemployed. In addition, the median level of education of interviewees was limited to a high school diploma with some college or limited vocational training, typical for the average American. Only a couple of respondents had advanced college degrees.

## The Role of Play in Families

From our data, we have observed family members engaging in complex negotiations—about time spent playing, household responsibilities, child care, and the social networks they brought with them to the simulated worlds—and the impact all these negotiations have on players' perceptions of meaningful activities. The fact that so many people play MMORPGs seems itself worthy of note. We find it amazing the degree to which playing MMORPGs together can both enhance social skills for family members and yet also act as a barrier to intimacy. This contradictory effect of digital play should not be a surprise. Our play technology often produces both results, seeming to confirm our fears and stimulate our deepest desires and pleasures. Like most fan activities, *WoW* play gives fans something unique to talk about with other players, and this talk can provide a social lubricant for sustained interactions with strangers.

*Negotiating play time, negotiating family responsibility*
It is often said that computer games can be addictive. We rarely apply the medical language we use to describe this pleasurable activity, with its complex reward system, to more acceptable leisure activities, such as sports or chess playing. Instead, game playing often gets mistakenly lumped into the category of gambling. Clearly, players choose how to use their time, and they often complain themselves that playing *WoW* takes up time better spent elsewhere. But making the jump to addiction is too great a leap. That said, MMORPG involvement has real-world effects on families, raising concerns that players themselves invoke when they talk about playing the game.

Family members often mention the attractiveness of play and the responsibilities of everyday life as a source of anxiety. How does one structure his or her time? How does one assume his or her family responsibilities and still have time to play? And how does a parent deal with a child who wants to play rather than do the work he or she needs to do around the house? Betty, thirty-six years old and unemployed, pointed this out.

> There are times where, you know, things that should be getting done aren't done because of the gaming. Um, my mom, for example . . . like I said when we were growing up and my brother was a gamer. He totally disregarded all of his responsibilities, all his schooling, his homework, and whatnot. So, it was frustrating for my mom, dealing with that, so. . . . You know, there was a lot of negativity there. But that's because it was a parent and a child, it was something . . . somewhat like

what I'm going through, but I go through it differently than what my mother did.

In Betty's family, dealing with her brother gave her mother experience in handling her commitment to playing, helping her find ways to accommodate both play and family responsibilities. Given the immediate rewards offered by digital games, players can find it difficult to stop in the middle of a dungeon run, especially since they are conducting it with other players who may or may not be sympathetic to their situations.

Such times have to be negotiated with other family members. Although *WoW* may appear an escape from everyday work, clearly for many playing requires a healthy balance with other everyday activities. As Oliver, twenty-one and an ore miner, comments

> Like, I'll come home from work and I'll hop on the game. And . . . and it's to do the things that, you know, I want to do in the game and then. . . . And then I start to lose sleep or go to work over it. But, I never really push it to the point where, you know, I'm gonna miss days of work or . . . this is not healthy. But at the same time, I have no issues with walking away from the game either. It is my . . . you know, my friends ever say "let's go out and do something," I don't reject them to play my game.

Carving out the time to play in a busy schedule is demanding. Negotiating playtime is essential to reduce the negative consequences of putting things off. Victor, thirty-nine and a heavy-equipment operator, makes this clear when he brings up his needing to get chores out of the way before playing.

> I try to do all those things that I feel like I should, you know, accomplish my chores, or you know, paying bills. I try and do all that stuff first before I get on because once I start playing *WoW*, you know, I kind of set a few goals for myself of things that I'd like to kind of accomplish before I log off. And sometimes it's only one or two things it can take a long time sometimes to just get one thing done, you know. Even just getting on there and selling and repairing and putting your things on the auction house can take twenty, thirty minutes sometimes, you know, depending on what you have going on. So um, it has been a problem in the past, you know, of putting things off. "Oh, I should I, you know, I'm going to be late now because I decided to do this or do on that on *WoW*."

The struggle over the acceptable time for play is accompanied by negotiations about responsibilities for family and work. Excessive playing time for one individual can seem normal to another. The need to talk about game time and

everyday responsibilities, therefore, seems essential for a family to maintain harmony in its communications and to avoid the resentments that can build. This is especially true for a household in which one member engages in gaming and another does not. The lack of understanding contributes to growing family tension. As Keeley, a thirty-four-year-old housewife, puts it

> I've never had a problem with him playing. I had a problem with him spending every second of his free time playing. So, anyway (laughs), It's not fun. I mean, I just don't understand really how he can be so involved in something to the exclusion of everything else. And he can do that, he can block everything else out and . . . I . . . maybe that's why I can't focus on the game, because I hear my children all over the place. And, I'm listening for everything that's going on in the house, and he just blocks everything out. And, I can't . . . I can't do that.

This also raises the gendered question of who is responsible within a household for taking care of children and household chores.

This conflict between gender roles and play versus household work came up many times in our interviews. Women are often the ones who have shouldered the household burdens, but not always. Women players may just as easily have conflicts with their boyfriends or husbands over their own play habits. Cinnabar, a thirty-three-year-old hairdresser, for example, talks about how her love for digital gaming centers around the social interactions that occur between fellow players and how she weighs these experiences against her role as a single mother. She struggles with making this balance out and has to negotiate her playtime with fellow guild members.

> I probably don't put quite enough attention into like . . . when it comes time to like put my kids to bed and stuff. I do find that I tend to, ah, you know, kind of let them roam free. I get addicted to it, and then I just don't want to get up. Or a lot of it is, you know, like if we're going to runs, um, I feel guilty asking, you know, the guild to wait to me while I put the kids to bed. Even though I know that I shouldn't. You know, if they're gonna let me play, they're gonna wait for me. But, ah, I feel bad making them wait.

For Cinnabar, as for many other players, lapses in the game play, such as flying between different parts of the virtual world, can be filled by washing dishes, doing laundry, and undertaking other household chores, since such game activities may take as long as fifteen minutes to accomplish.

These periodic breaks afford an opportunity both to play and to work.

However, the nature of the game play itself often makes it difficult to break away to do household duties, especially when confronting virtual enemies. Jane, a twenty-eight-year-old gas station attendant, for example, stated that her husband wanted her to help him cook dinner but that she had a difficult time pulling away from the game for fear of her avatar dying while in combat. As she puts it

> He wanted me to help him, ah, cook dinner, and I was in the middle of, actually I was, um, in a solo group, with just me, and I was like, "Hang on a second, this mob's killing me!" And I'm like, "I gotta get to a safe place!" you know, and then I come back and I'm near death. And I'm like, "I told you I was gonna die! I told you!" that's like one of the things I hate. I hate to die in game. He's like, "It simple, just run back to your corpse." I said, "No, I don't like to die!"

Balancing household chores and play activity constitutes a problem for all age groups that play the game. Putting off necessary chores is quite common. Getting involved in digital play where rewards are frequent and immediate can make the time go quickly, leading players to forget what they need to do when they need to do it. Hence, some players engage in strategies for structuring hours or days of play, marking out time for chores and time for play.

Theresa, a fifty-year-old truck driver, for example, made a decision to take just a day for play, "It will be a *WoW* day. And I will sit and play *WoW* all day." She makes a conscious decision to structure her time to allow for play and chores. In addition to the struggle between chores and play, there also exists the need to negotiate time spent outside the game with activities away from home that also give pleasure. Having guild members or those you have befriended inside the virtual worlds of play ask for help can be a strong deterrent to stepping away from the game even momentarily. Alvin, forty-four and a project manager, mentioned this in his attempt not to "allow *WoW* to take precedence over my life." He said "there's times when I was going to go out, um, and then, you know, somebody I know on *WoW* says, 'Hey we're doing this, do you want to help me?' And I will stay in instead of going out and meeting actual people face-to-face. But for the most part I do, you know, when I'm working, I'm working, um, when I'm not working, I play. And I take time of my nonwork and say, 'OK at this time I'm going to the gym to exercise. This time I'm going to the bar to watch the game.'"

Finally, one interviewee believes that playing *WoW* offered an escape from overwhelming workloads, work which in his profession as an intellectual, teacher, and writer, never seemed to slacken. He rationalized his game play as an escape from his work but also as a form of resistance to the capitalist orga-

nization of work itself and the alienation that often emerges from its shadows. As Mansfield, forty-four and a college teacher, put it

> For me it's like an escape. . . . I feel like I'm overwhelmed with work. . . . I mean that kind of thing is just masochistic I think 'cause especially in our kind of work you could . . . you're never done with the work. . . . It's like a treadmill. So, I don't know, I feel like the amount of work they ask us to do is unrealistic in the first place, so, um, I mean there are times when I think I should not be playing the game cause I have work to do. But then the way I kind of rationalize that to myself is that the, you know, I need my own space to get away from that madness. . . . It's like the job is in your head 24/7, at least our jobs. [He laughs] I have my moments.

In addition to negotiating playing time and responsibilities for conducting household chores, another important consideration involves the extent to which outside social relationships, friends, and family members introduce new players into these virtual worlds and either sustain the play or restrict it. The evidence is overwhelming in our sample that most people, if not all of them, have been introduced to *WoW* through friends or family members. Although this should not be surprising in itself, the degree to which such introductions alter family dynamics both online and off line seems noteworthy. Those introductions usually mean the development of shared play activities which can generate a new basis for interpersonal communication.

## Off-Line and Online Family Networks and Game Play

The players we have observed and talked with over the years were not the lonely, isolated gamers often portrayed in media popularizations. Quite the opposite is true. Although people may choose to engage in solitary activities in *World of Warcraft*, most prefer playing with friends and associates. In some cases, an individual introduced to the game by a friend may go off to play on a different server and develop a new set of associates. For example, Graphus, twenty-nine and on disability, makes this point. Neighbors introduced him to the game before they moved away, but he did not really play with them because of the different levels of advancement in their characters. "I never really got into playing with them," he said, "because they were already up in gear, and in a different guild, and they're on different servers. But, uh, I don't know, my Dad plays. But he's on a different server."

This is a social process we noted early in our research. When a player has an avatar at a low level, higher-level players, even if they are friends, often drift away to play with other players at their same performance level. In these instances, guilds may bridge the gap, providing new friendships while players "level up" their characters. Although some players make new associates in the game—and may even go so far as to visit them in physical space—many others simply stay with their virtual associates through the game but do not interact with them outside. On the other hand, players may meet people in everyday life who give some indication that they play *WoW,* which in turn provides new communication between former strangers.

Mortimer, a twenty-year-old waiter, observed: "Occasionally you'll just start talking to someone, and they sound like they might play *World of Warcraft*, just a stranger. You ask them if they do, and they're not . . . that . . . you know, you meet somebody who plays the game. But, other than the friend I, who I started playing, who I got to start playing, I don't really know anyone."

For Mortimer, the game had not been a place to meet new people, but he did recognize that *WoW* can provide a source of communication between fans. On the other hand, quite a few players who join a guild develop acquaintances over several years, playing together, conducting raids, and talking about their everyday lives via chat without physically meeting them. In part, because of the many servers available for playing the game, virtual friendships often develop between those who play on the same server. In addition, once a friendship develops, the software allows players to declare these friendships, to exchange email addresses, and—if new friends move to a different server—to track them. Keeley brought up the point of how *WoW* can serve as an introduction to strangers in everyday life, apart from time within the game.

> There's a cashier at Wal-Mart in town. He does play, he does not play on the same server I do. We've never played together. Um, but [he laughs], I was really excited one day and I had gone in to Wal-Mart and I was just ramblin' on. . . . Because, he's a nice guy, I've been through his register before, and I was just rambling on about this new mount I got and he's like, "You play *WoW*?" And we started talking about this and . . . you know, I can't remember his name but he goes to the community college here. I see him around every now and then. I've run into a few people who do play. I don't really know them.

The family of Slater, a forty-three-year-old manufacturing assembler, plays, although they occupy different time zones. And, his other relatives also play, but he does not stay in touch with them. His main point seemed that the game

allowed him to develop a relationship with someone he never met in person simply by using the software chat functions and video chat.

> I've known quite a few people (who play the game). The most obvious would be my real-life brother who does play occasionally. Well, he plays, I'd say he's almost a daily player . . . almost. Uhm, my cousin and I don't know what his earlier patterns were, I don't see him very much at all lately. He is in a bit of a different time zone from me. And I knew this girl from Australia which I met before I got into *World of Warcraft*, though I never met her in person. But, I got to know her, like, as far as I'm concerned, with . . . um, when you can open up video chat and actually sit down and talk to someone, after you put in a hundred hours of face-to-face conversation . . . just 'cause you're not in the same continent . . . you kinda know them. And I gamed with her too.

The use of *WoW* as a source for communication came up time and time again in our interviews. As with any hobby, fans develop an intense interest in the specifics of their game, in part to share such knowledge with others. Lindsey, a twenty-two-year-old college student, went to dinner with an individual she knew who played *WoW,* and the game became the main topic of their conversations for at least a half an hour. Not merely a subject for conversation, *WoW* also provides an opportunity for family members to stay in touch and to engage in an activity in which all of the members participate, even if remotely. Alvin made this point when he talked about the difficulties geographical distance presented for maintaining contact with his friends. Playing the game with them, he noted, brought them closer together: "Yeah, and it turned out that after I started, a lot of my real-life friends that I was not in contact with, because I was eight hundred miles away, play. . . . We tried. The specific friend I worked with, and helped raise her children for the first six years of their lives, so I'm kinda Uncle Alvin. So, when they started playing, I played with them for a while, but they're Alliance and I'm Horde, so. . . . We don't play so much. We do talk though."

Often work relationships fade into play relationships as workers and bosses intermingle in the play space of *WoW*. Some players mentioned that they used to play with a former boss, and others mentioned that, when they became boss, the roles were reversed. In all such cases, the role reversals meant that the play space of *WoW* acted as a neutral territory for people to engage in questing and raiding without bringing their work relations into the game. When they did so, though, conflicts developed, usually within a guild (if they belonged to the same guild).

Tina, a fifty-year-old truck driver, stated that she knew about four or five people off line who played *WoW*. "Three of them," she said "are T's friends, and

two of 'em are my friends that I've known for almost three years. And she's a nurse, and her husband's a nurse, and they. . . . She was taking care of my mom when I got to know her and, uh, she was one of the contributing factors for really getting me to play because I had someone to play with."

So, what does it mean to have a family that plays together? Who plays in the household and how do they do it? And what do they get out of their playtime?

## Families Playing Together

When we asked gamers if they knew families who played *WoW* together, they responded that they knew several families in their social networks who played together on a regular basis. A husband and wife ran, as a couple, one of the guilds whose membership we interviewed, which followed a pattern of other guilds developed by families. Although family-owned guilds may be a minority, they nonetheless rebut the assumption that young males dominate the social networks popular in the media.

Bruce, a thirty-nine-year-old retail clerk, for example, who runs one of the guilds with his wife, plays on the same server with both his brother-in-law and his sixty-year-old father. Linda, fifty-nine, a nurse, and currently disabled, plays with her child and his son using the game to help bridge the physical distance between herself and her family. "Well," she said, "I not only play with my grandson, my son gets on, and the three of us will go into dungeons together. . . . Yeah, considering they live all the way up in Buffalo, so they're quite a distance away." Alicia stated that the guild she left was organized by a man and his wife and their two daughters. Other families without children or couples living together will often join up and use the playtime to develop common experiences.

For households that have only one computer, playtime has to be negotiated to reduce conflict. As Jane said, "Oh, I could never get bored with this game. My husband is . . . I always kick him off the computer. He's like 'you know what? I'm done' and I'm like 'it's my turn.' I'll play it all day long. . . . Yeah, he plays, he doesn't play as much as he did. . . . You know, we used to fight over the computer to see who's gonna play. But he's . . . kind of slacked off a lot, and I'm the one that's taken over."

Although it may be tempting to assume a strict gender division in who plays the game and who does chores, in fact, the reality is much messier. Women

just as eagerly as men assume the gamer role and negotiate family time. Often when one member of a couple plays and the other does not, playing can push the pair further apart; but if both decide to play, the game can bring them closer. John, thirty-five years old and on disability, said, for example, "Oh yeah my wife plays. . . .The funny thing was at first I was talking to her, and I said my ex-girlfriend hated me playing *WoW*. That's when I said, I want to see . . . or a girlfriend or somebody who likes to play *WoW*. I got her addicted to it, and then now it's hard to share the computer with her [he laughs]."

Negotiating computer time for play always proves delicate, and often other family issues affect decisions about how much time to spend in virtual environments. Playing together can also relieve the occasional boredom of the game itself, as James—a twenty-one-year-old college student—points out. The common experiences of questing and running dungeons not only offers a topic for conversation, as we mentioned, but also helps generate common experiences, experiences like watching movies or going out for dinner. As James says

> It depends sometimes, because there'll be times where like S. wants to do this one thing. Or, you know, as we were talking about earlier, I have to do this thing . . . um, but the thing is, I start to get very bored and lonely if we're not playing together. Like, you know, our Worgens are, I think, Level 12, you know, so, like, ah, something just came out where we just want to experience it together. We have the exact same experience. We have characters right now to play. Those characters are a in party together so we have it exactly to the letter like, well, to the number, in terms of experience, . . . yeah.

For James and his significant other, planning their moves together in the game environment provides a source of pleasure.

Other family members—especially adults who play with their children—engage in a dynamic different from those of couples who work at playing together. Gerry, a forty-five-year-old project coordinator in purchasing who played with his son, felt that he needed to restrict his son's play to keep him from spending too much time in the game. Nevertheless, Gerry mentioned that playing with his child does bridge the generation gap and offers the opportunity for quality adult-child communication. As he put it, "I can play with my son, and it's something we have in common to play. Something to talk about . . . you have that problem with a generation gap try and get, you know, talk with your kids. . . . I think it helps a little bit because he can . . . in the game, he's not thirteen anymore, he's just another character. And we're both doing

the same thing, so you're almost equal in the game. You're not father and son anymore. So, it's almost like a fantasy thing."

Our interviewees often discussed this ability to equalize adult-child status through game performance. A teenager may, if he or she has the general ability to control his or her avatar, lead a twenty-five-player raid that includes a mix of older adults, say thirty to forty years old, and other teenagers. This calls for a different decorum than we usually see in a youth culture that tends to market niche experiences by age segments. What we found was much more complex, allowing more cross-generational conversations as well as policing by adults of other player behaviors when children were present. Of course, age differences sometimes show up in the choice of games pursued. Mansfield's younger brother, for example, used to play *WoW*, but now "prefers the first-person shooters," a game genre dominated by younger players.

Finally, family play can bridge difficulties in everyday life, not only providing a common experience but also emotional bonding. Oliver emphasizes this when he discussed how playing *WoW* helped his mother.

> I have one family member that plays *WoW*, and that is my mother. . . . And she, uh, she has had some hardships happen in her life and. . . . I kinda convinced her into playing or at least giving it a shot because . . . she, you know, sits around the house and does nothing or goes out to a movie and spends money like she doesn't have it. . . . So, I kinda set her up with an account, you know, and got her into it so she can kinda, you know, at least socialize through the game, not . . . have no one. You know, I don't care if it's talking to someone through chat or anything, it's better than just sitting on the sofa and watching TV for months on end.

Although some professionals suggest that extensive game playing may indicate psychological depression, we discovered that such depression—or other forms of social withdrawal—rather occurs before game play starts. It does appear that, for some, game play can provide a form of self-medication, offering an emotional high that comes from accomplishing complex tasks with others when players have developed trust through quests and dungeon runs.

## Enhanced Family Dynamics and Game Playing

We argue that, contrary to the commonsense view that video and online games damage individual social skills and desensitize gamers to violence and other

socially unacceptable deviant behaviors, much of our data illustrates that in many instances online game play augments gamers' social skills. How are family dynamics enhanced through digital play, specifically *WoW*? For children and parents it may come simply from a player's having his or her child show how to play a character, which gives the child a sense of empowerment. Oliver discussed his attempts to involve an older family member in the game.

> She's a long way . . . from where she started. She could barely function, she was used to the Pac-Man generation, not a 3-D generation. So, ah, it took her a while to get into it, but once she got over the motions and how to do everything, she actually really enjoyed it. She enjoys it for a lot of the different aspects that I don't. . . . We're, you know, we actually have something to connect to and relate to. I mean, you know, she kinda looks to me for advice in how to play and, you know, and in turn I . . . it's . . . it gives us something to talk about on even ground of simple interests, you know?

In addition to this teaching role within a family, bridging geography through common, online play and using the game as a tool of communication as well as a focal point for conversation, appeared the major ways family dynamics were enhanced through play.

Discovering that game players lived in close proximity often prompted invitations to off-line activities, as we mentioned. Jason, a forty-three-year-old animal medical specialist, discussed this point.

> Ah, yeah, well, B., and L., and I met through here. M., I guess, was in their guild and then, uh, I got in there as well. And then we found out that we lived next to each other, and B. ended up comin' over, until, uh, we know each other. Done cook-outs together and whatnot. And it's funny, cause we always end up talkin' about *Wo*W. And, of course, my boys do all play as well. So it's nice to have that interaction, especially with the kids nowadays, as there isn't much else for us to do together. Uh . . . so, I do enjoy the time when we do play together, definitely.

In Jason's family, playing the game with his sons has offered a good source of communication. Although his wife does not play, she has been supportive often sitting in and watching. According to Jason

> I mean, it's really brought my family together, it's really been a good communication thing for us. It's something that we all enjoy. Even Betty, you know, she doesn't play but she . . . she's interested in the game. Josh, her son Josh, he has a toon that he made with her, for her. She don't play it, he plays it for her. But he tells her how

it's doing, and she comes and looks at everybody's toons and checks out their gear and . . . you know, she sits next to me when I play. So, she sits here and she listens, and she knows about as much of it as I do. And it's just, you know, it's neat that even though she don't play, she's even involved in it in a way.

Betty, Jason's wife, confirmed his observations in suggesting *WoW* as a way of building communication, something outside of everyday chores and family life.

Again, with distant relatives, playing *WoW* together can bridge the geographical gap, encouraging chat conversations via in-game audio software. Following game goals can bring people together in an activity that gives them something to discuss and an opportunity to bridge differences. Although David, a forty-one-year-old computer consultant, and his son play at home, the boy's mother lives in another state. When she is online, they are able to play together as a family using the communication system established by the game. Mansfield, commenting on one of his guild members, mentioned that the air force shipped C's son out to Germany and that playing *WoW* offered them a way to stay in touch easily. Another woman player we interviewed mentioned that she and her husband, who was stationed in Iraq, maintained frequent contact through *WoW*. Bridging geographical distance was a major benefit for families separated by employment or school. For those who live in close proximity, the advent of a new release of the game can prompt more socializing off line.

We also find it interesting that the simulated worlds of *WoW* provide an inexpensive form of virtual traveling, or escape, for some players, which they share with their families. This is especially important for the mostly working-class individuals we sampled, many of whom have little to spend on expensive vacations or commodities. As Victor, a thirty-one-year-old heavy-equipment operator, suggested, "Like I said before, it's definitely an escape for me, um, from my own, from earth, I guess. And, um, so it's a way though that my wife and I can kinda have fun together and go on an adventure together without actually leaving our house because, you know, I mean, we try and save our money. We'll go out to concerts and stuff like that, or movies now and then, but, you know, um, we'd rather stay in because we both have pretty social jobs. It's a way for us to kind of escape reality together, you know."

Not only does joining friendly guilds often enhance family interaction, it may lead to exchanges of personal information that can in turn lead to new social opportunities. As trust builds through the observation in game behavior, more opportunities open up for taking risks and revealing personal

information—whether it involves children lamenting about parents to adult members and receiving support or finding others with common interests outside the game.

For example, Bruce mentioned that "a bunch of people in the guild, . . . once they've got in the guild, I think they found a friendship in this guild where they actually have given out their information. And we actually went out and met them. One of them being J., another one being A. And, um, they actually gave us their information, and me and my wife went out and met them." Bruce noted that meeting others outside the game after developing a virtual trust helps strengthen friendships. Meeting someone in person with whom you have played for some time can be a powerful method of increasing social solidarity, putting a real face to a virtual name.

Game play also helps families by providing a venue for shy individuals to learn new ways of socializing while still feeling safe. Barbara, a twenty-one-year-old housewife, made this point. Being behind a computer actually made her feel safe, she said, adding that it made "making friends with people is easier for me because I am shy." Meeting people in game can be rewarding or not, depending—as in any social situation—on the mutual interests of those involved. Players can develop in-game friendships that follow them for years and express compassion and support without actually physically meeting these friends. Keeley made this point about an individual she met through her guild.

> I've never had anyone else that I've kept in touch with. There are a couple of people that I talk to in the game but I don't know anything. . . . I don't know really who they are. I don't know their names, or . . . really even where they're from. Um, but, there's one gentleman, he's about sixty-five, that we talk every now and then because we were . . . his guild was the very first one I joined with G. and . . . at one point, he had open-heart surgery. And . . . I don't know why, but he asked me to take control of the guild until he recovered enough to come back. And, um, the guild has gone away since then. . . . But, I do talk with him every now and then, just to check in on, you know, how he's doing and how his wife and his children and grandchildren are doing.

For others, the intimate exchange of information can lead to relationships outside the game. Talking in game, playing together often leads to personal disclosures and more intimate meetings. More than a few *WoW* players mentioned meeting a partner or starting a new romance off line after playing together for some time. Being able to talk safely by using voice protocol software while playing can provide a powerful incentive to follow up with off-line meetings. James,

for example, met his partner playing together and talking online. From playing *WoW*, they graduated to talking on the phone and, because they each liked what the other had to say, eventually met in person and developed a long-term relationship. Socializing in game, often through a guild, can also provide new opportunities for less intimate social relationships.

A quote from Victor illustrates the points we have been making. Developing a regular relationship online with other players, sharing stories and confidences, can help change one's mood. As he puts it

> The parts (of the game) that I do like, though, are seeing or talking with people that I, you know, see online, um, on a regular basis and just, you know, you develop some kind of relationship with these people, and it's nice to be able to joke around with them. And you kind of follow each other's lives at least to some extent. So, you know, I may be in kind of a bad mood, and I get on *WoW*, and I start, um, you know, doing some questing, and I might see a few people that I'm used to talking to, and being able to joke round with them can often change my mood from sour to good. So, I do like that.

Although game play in virtual environments can enhance both friendships and family relationships, it can also create distance between players and produce conflicts among family members. This is especially true when family communication has been a problem and family members have very different interests.

## Family Relationships and Friendships
## Distanced by Game Playing

Most interviewees mentioned that playing *WoW* enhanced their relationships, and many claimed it provided space for solitude if desired. Therefore, we cannot so simply say that playing MMORPGs always helps relationships; it can also make them more problematic. In particular, the negotiation of time spent playing versus other responsibilities, as we mentioned, becomes a factor in family discord. This is also the case between game players and nonplayers when each party views the time spent playing quite differently. The high degree of attention demanded by the game, combined with its frequently satisfying reward system, leads rapidly to absorption in the game and the blocking out of

off-line issues and responsibilities. If a relationship already evidences problems in communication or intimacy, clearly from the comments we elicited, such problems can be aggravated by digital play—especially if only one member of a family or relationship is involved. Negotiating the time spent playing often involves off-line desires and demands. As Keeley says about dealing with her husband's game playing

> Um, it took . . . me coming within a few days of asking for a divorce to get him to understand that he needed to be involved in our relationship and our family. That . . . he couldn't spend, you know, six hours after work playing the game and all day on the weekends, and us have a happy family. And he couldn't really limit himself, so . . . it became him telling me that I needed to stop him from playing when I needed him to spend time with me. And that didn't work for me either because I'm not his mother. And, he's a grown man. He needs to learn to limit himself.

Keeley admitted that she and her husband had problems communicating before he began playing but that they were working on them and their relationship had improved. When both partners play together, the conflicts may concern who gets to use the computer (if only one is available) and how to divide family responsibilities. But having a common interest does help facilitate communication, as we have seen, and it can provide a common platform from which to talk about other life issues. Given the highly pleasurable rewards of playing MMORPGs, for many individuals it becomes necessary to set strict time limits on their play—and for others to quit the simulated world entirely. When family members do not share the same interests or pass judgments about a particular fan activity, such as playing video games by adults in general, family relationships can become stressed.

For other players, MMORPGs like *WoW* can provide a relief from family intimacy and constant attention—a period of deliberate solitude. Some might call this an escape from real life, but the question is rarely raised: An escape to where? Why does one want to go there? And what is wrong with being in a fantasy world if it causes no harm? The answers to these questions will depend on the expectations of other family members—what they consider a family to be and what it should do. All this makes good communication essential, because one individual's desire can alienate another if it is not explained or shared. Since most of our interviews point to ways in which game playing enhances or distances some relationships, it is important to differentiate the conditions around each outcome. Lindsey, for example, used *WoW* as a relief from family pressures,

allowing her to find a safe space within which to control her own emotions around her family. "It's time out," she said, "definitely. I bring my—on weekends that I go home—I bring my computer with me so that I can just, like, when my family is sort of starting to get to me, you know, just too much time, I can go to play *WoW*. And, you know, I can play *WoW* and still talk to them, you know, and that's good because when I have my attention divided like that, I tend not to get as mad at what my family says."

Another interviewee, Samuel, said his family becomes frustrated with him because they believe he plays *WoW* too often. He responds by questioning why they want to see him more frequently than on Sunday. In other words, his desire for game time and time with virtual friends outweighs his desire to see family more than once a week. For some this might sound outlandish. However, others might view this as a desire for privacy and solitude in an environment where an individual has a higher degree of control than in everyday interactions.

Jane admits that playing *WoW* means time away from family responsibilities. And, as she says, when she is involved in *WoW*, talking on vent and generally wrapped up in game issues, she becomes oblivious to outside distractions. This degree of immersion causes issues for her family, especially when her husband tries to get her attention.

> I say playing is time away. He gets mad at me 'cause I get so involved in the game, you know, I'm talking on vent and so wrapped up in the game. That, ah, he'll be talking to me and I don't even hear him, I'll ignore him. And it's like, you know, he has to basically stand in front of me, "I'm trying to talk to you . . ." yeah, yes. It's just the kid's over here. Yeah, he actually, he has to physically stand in front of me to be like, "Hey I'm trying to talk to you. Can you get up off the game for a few minutes and actually listen?"

Although the game produces an intense involvement through its reward system and through real-time, social interactions, the time spent playing the game versus time spent with family proves always an issue. This involves how family members understand spending their time together or separately. A lack of understanding about the pleasure of digital games constitutes one factor. Another is that different individuals in a household like different rewards. If they do not discuss these differences, conflicts arise. Gerry points this out, "If you ask my wife, she probably thinks I'm on all the time, but, you know, they're watching TV, I'm doing this, right? So instead of sitting beside them . . . I guess,

you know, we may lose a little bit of the interaction but, you know, she doesn't want me talking to her anyway when she's watching her TV show."

Clearly, digital game playing, especially MMORPGs like *WoW*, can both distance and enhance relationships. Like any technology focused on pleasurable rewards, the software works to amplify already existing differences as well as similarities between couples and individuals. Although much of the public discourse critical of video game playing tends to blame the technology—the game itself (either violent or nonviolent)—our data points to a more complex understanding of how the technology of digital play mediates family relationships. Similar family conflicts arose about the reading of popular novels when they were ascendant during the Victorian period. Debates then often cast book reading as "causing" children to become isolated and unsocial. Such fears persist when new technology appear on the market. The assumptions that we carry from a nondigital era—that physical presence is important for family harmony, that spending time on computers increases your social isolation, and that game playing should make you highly social—these assumptions ignore the complex aspects of our digital technology and how it mediates relationships in ways with which we are still coming to terms. Perhaps, Bruce says it best when he argues that gaming is really just another form of communication. We can easily view novels as authors communicating with their readers and movies as filmmakers communicating with their audience. In games, the interactive nature of the media encompasses not only the makers of the simulated worlds and their artists, but also fellow players. Such a technology bridges the distance of space similar to the way novels bridge the element of time.

## Implications for Our Research

Overall, our findings corroborate research by Claude Fischer (2011), David Buckingham (2007), and others that technology and game play have forced families (and gamers) to develop innovative ideas for creating and sustaining family solidarity. We find that, increasingly, today's gamers are not the isolated and troubled youth about whom many antivideo game proponents speak in their campaigns against the video game industry. Rather, today's gamers, both hard-core and casual players, consist of men and women who range in age from early teens to senior citizens and whose jobs cover the occupational spectrum from unemployed to civil-service worker. Our data—rather than

painting a utopian or dystopian image of game involvement—indicates a much more complicated relationship both within families and between individuals in negotiating the time spent playing, the rules of the game, household responsibilities, and a host of other intimate concerns about this engagement with a technology of pleasure. Clearly, families are, for the most part, making the necessary adjustments to fit this new technology into their lives by following the expanded possibilities it provides for communication. As in any pleasurable technology, a good thing can be engaged in far more than may be healthy. However, this appears to be less the result of the game itself and more of the relationship between individuals and families. With growing social, political, and economic inequality and the hollowing out of the middle class, simulated play environments provide cheap entertainment as well as vehicles for organizing on a mass basis. Obviously, games in themselves cannot change the world. That is our task—one which games can facilitate, but never substitute for actions on the street.

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