



REVIEW: William Sims Bainbridge, *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World*

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REVIEWS

William Sims Bainbridge, *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World*. 248 pp. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010.*

Bruce J. Petrie[†]

It is possible that World of Warcraft is so complex, so culturally rich, and so expansive, that it will become a permanent part of our civilization. (p. 206)

New branches of social science primarily engaging the “internet revolution” are appearing alongside mainstream research and journals such as *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* are providing social scientists with an outlet of peer-reviewed research. HPS scholars will find new methodologies and the relation of technology to social science of particular interest. Social scientists are becoming increasingly interested in virtual realities (see Milburn [*Spontaneous Generations* 2008, 63]) and are declaring time spent “in-game” ethnographic research. William Sims Bainbridge boasts 2300+ hours (approximately 96 days) of ethnographic research into a virtual world he calls “The Warcraft Civilization.” Blizzard Entertainment reported in a December 2008 press release that World of Warcraft (WoW), its extraordinarily successful 2004 massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) comprised 11.5 million subscribers worldwide.¹ In order to accommodate player demand, Blizzard uses hundreds of servers, artfully called realms, each running an instance of WoW for subscribers to play on. There are four types of realms: normal or player-versus-environment (PvE) realms, player-versus-player (PvP) realms, role-playing (RP) realms, and role-playing player-versus-player (RP-PvP) realms. The most popular realms are PvE and PvP; players on RP and RP-PvP realms are meant to “live” in WoW and therefore must adhere to role-playing policies such as remaining “in-character” of the avatar they have selected.

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¹ Blizzard Entertainment Press Releases. “World of Warcraft Subscriber Base Reaches 11.5 Million Worldwide.” Blizzard Entertainment.
us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?081121.

Bainbridge created various avatars on several realms but elected to focus his investigation on the less popular role-playing realms in order to explore the lore of WoW. As such, Bainbridge does not confine his research within the MMORPG but also draws upon accompanying literature including novels featuring prominent non-player characters (NPCs) and the online World of Warcraft Wiki.² Bainbridge focuses on the lore-centric role-playing servers because he refers to WoW as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or a “total work of art” allegorical of the society in which it was created and reflecting the cultural traditions of common folk. As an extension of Bainbridge’s role-playing, *The Warcraft Civilization* is stylistically similar to an activity log of his characters’ adventures. His avatars are virtual explorers participating in a work of art and communicating their findings back to him. Each chapter features narration by one of Bainbridge’s characters, apparently chosen to represent the particular focus of that chapter. This, in addition to the inclusion of discussions Bainbridge holds between his own characters and the extensive detail of trivial adventures, can make it difficult to decipher his subtle arguments.

Bainbridge argues that WoW is a work of art reflecting various aspects of Western culture. His chapters on heritage, religion, learning, cooperation, economy, and identity are meant to draw comparisons between the Warcraft Civilization and the real world. In chapter 2, Bainbridge discusses WoW’s back-story and how competing civilizations came to define the current Warcraft Civilization. He argues in chapter 3 that fictional religions can teach us about real ones and uses WoW to discuss a potential form of “real” immortality. He claims “I would consider a continued existence for my main WoW character, behaving as I would behave if I still lived, as a realistic form of immortality... Ultimately, virtual worlds may evolve into the first real afterlife, not merely critiquing religion but replacing it” (p. 62). Bainbridge’s fourth chapter portrays WoW as a teaching environment for real-world skills and is valuable to scientists because “there is much to learn about learning from how people learn in WoW” (p. 89). Bainbridge discusses the flow of gold currency in his sixth chapter detailing the many professions and secondary skills a character may choose to pursue. Although he argues WoW inadequately models a real-world economy, the real impact of WoW’s economy is that millions of players may come to expect the real-world economy to function in a similar fashion.

I looked forward to Bainbridge’s chapter on cooperation because there is a rich guild culture within WoW designed to facilitate the organization of

² www.wowwiki.com.

large raiding parties, especially at the maximum level where players must cooperate in order to encounter new content. There is a common dogma within the raiding community that WoW really begins at the maximum level. Unfortunately, Bainbridge's exposure to this raiding culture seems limited and his discussion of it is practically non-existent. This is likely the result of his focus on RP realms which typically lack "hardcore raiding guilds"—perhaps because of the "out-of-character" competition that usually accompanies such team mentalities. Bainbridge's cooperation chapter instead focuses on player-NPC interaction and barriers to player-player cooperation such as technical restrictions and language. Unfortunately, Bainbridge focused only on the fictional languages found in WoW and not the diverse array of real world languages spoken in guilds.

Bainbridge's chapter on identity is the most intriguing. Bainbridge frames this chapter by discussing the social self, which is "the set of ideas individuals have about themselves, which are derived from communication with other people" (p. 174). In a world where appearance, gender, and race are set by the player and can change at a moment's notice (for a small fee) the most consistent aspect of a character's identity is the social self. He compares the role of gender, race, and status in WoW to analogous features in the real world but of prime concern to Bainbridge is how people are not only role-players in WoW but also actors in real life. Bainbridge is careful to distinguish between the identity of the character and the identity of the player through a concept of role distance; avoiding a conflation he charges several others with. Role distance helps explain why players can command their avatars to perform behaviours they would consider to be unacceptable in the real world. The apparent lack of disconnect of one's actions in the virtual world (such as online-bullying) to the very real-world consequences of those actions is incredibly fascinating but one Bainbridge does not discuss.

As a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, WoW is something that must be experienced to be properly understood. The unfortunate consequence of Bainbridge's focus on role-play and lore in WoW is that NPCs and characters receive more attention than the people controlling them. WoW is not just a fictional civilization; it is a real-world global society of actors performing in a dynamic art form.

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