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World of Warcraft: Creating a safe and secure place for an entertaining war

- Draft paper -

1. Introduction

In this paper we will address two issues:

1. The different concepts of war underlying the highly successful online game "World of Warcraft" (WoW), and
2. The function of different levels and forms of surveillance within the game.

Concerning the concepts of war embedded in the game's world, we will argue that WoW presents a mix of different concepts, whereby we will highlight two of the main concepts: On first sight WoW seems to be based on a romantic, pre-modern conception of war. However, we will argue that WoW also include elements of (post-)modern information warfare.

We included the struggle of the Blizzard Entertainment against "botting", "cheating", and other forms of "misuse" of the infrastructure on which the game is based (including software and servers) in our analysis, since we will argue that this struggle may also be viewed from the perspective of information warfare.

We will use this by now quite familiar term in a broad sense. In his book on the "Visions of the Information Society" (2002) Michael Giesecke suggested to

understand the term "information society" as a concept of self-description. Therefore, an "information society" is a society, in which information is seen as a major resource and which pays much intention to the collection, production, and distribution of information. Hence, we regard "information warfare" as an analytical category, in which we place any concept of war, which pays special attention to information and information infrastructure. Thus, this category compasses different concepts like "Netcentric Warfare" or "War 2.0", which share a special focus on information.

The concept of information warfare also provides a link to the issue of surveillance, since authors like Stephen Graham (2007) have pointed out the often overlooked connection between surveillance and post-modern warfare.

In this paper we will use "surveillance" in a descriptive way, thus we regard surveillance as "the practice of gathering and sorting data with the explicit purpose of influencing and managing the data target" (Ball 2007, p. 297). Thus, surveillance *per se* is neither good nor bad.

Virtual worlds represent perfect sites of “dataveillance”, where every move and any form of communication is already at hand in a digital form and thus easy to monitor, store, and process, therefore, it is quite surprising that there is currently little to no research on surveillance in the context of video games. However, our main point here is not, that there is surveillance in Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) like WoW, we will rather be asking what the purpose of the different forms of surveillance taking place is. One answer to this question is already presented in the title of this paper: It's about creating a safe and secure place for an entertaining war.

Before going to the main section of the paper, let me quickly remind you that WoW like many other modern videogames does allow different styles of playing the game. In case of WoW this is actually quite obvious. For example, users may choose to play different races and classes in different realm-types (servers), which may or may not allow Player vs. Player-Combat (PvP). When describing the game we are referring either to our own experience of playing or to the work of other authors. We do believe we are able to describe most of the game as it is "typically" played; however, it could be the case that some may be playing the game in a totally different way.

2. The romantic pre-modern concept of war

One might be tempted to characterize a game called „World of Warcraft“ with 2 million subscribers in Europe, more than 2.5 million in North America, and approximately 5.5 million in Asia (Blizzard 2008) as some kind of virtual World War. However, this is not what the players experience. WoW is typically played in small groups of 5 to 10 characters, with the biggest battleground allowing a maximum of 80 players (40 players of each fraction).

Although war is the major background narrative, the game as experienced by the players is more about the adventures of a single character and the group he belongs to. When defining war following Geyer (1995: 136) as mass-death organized and accomplished by humans, as the system, the acts, and the consequences of killing and being-killed, one might even argue, that WoW is actually not about war, because of the remarkable absence mass-death in the game (Hoffstadt and Nagenborg 2008).

However, we still hold Geyer's definition as useful for our analysis, since it stresses the fact that wars and combats require organization. The way combats are organized in WoW is the outcome of the design by Blizzard Entertainment Inc. (Blizzard), the game's developer and service provider, as well as of the communication between the players.

The design of the game focuses on fair and balanced combats and fights between players or between players and the environment. This is one factor which adds to the overall impression of an "old fashioned" view on war already established on the level of graphical representation. Other factors include the fantasy setting, the general absence of modern technology, the importance of cavalry in battles, the absence of mass-death, and the absence of civilian casualties (Hoffstadt and Nagenborg 2008).

3. Infowar@Azeroth

While players of team oriented first persons shooters like “Counter-Strike” may share physical space, players of WoW usually will control their character from single computers located in different locations. Thus, there is a need to communicate by channels provided by the game as well as by tools provided by third parties coordinating collaborative actions of up to 40 players within the game. Recently Blizzard integrated a voice chat feature within WoW, which apparently is meant as a substitute for third party communication services like "TeamSpeak" and other tools enabling online voice real time communication. The classic form of communication within WoW is a text based chat system, but Blizzard also provides further channels for game-external communication and information exchange to the players including forums on the official website.

These channels provided by Blizzard are subjected to regulations like the "Terms of Use Agreement" (Blizzard 2007), which define penalties for the use of inappropriate use of language (e. g. racial or sexual harassment) as well as misuse of the channels provided (e. g. advertising or spamming). Besides enforcing these regulations manually, Blizzard also offers an automatic filter system, which removes indecent words from the text channels. It has to be noted that enforcing regulations on communication is not a specific characteristic of WoW. For example, the "Xbox Live Terms of Use and Privacy Statement" (2005) includes the following statement:

"You should not expect any level of privacy concerning your use of the live communication features of the Service. These communications may be monitored; … We do not routinely monitor your use of the messaging features of the Service. However, to the maximum extent permitted by law, we may monitor your messages and may disclose information about you … " (Microsoft 2005).

However, the monitoring of communication does make WoW a rather surreal theatre of war where one may kill the enemy, but may not swear. But then this kind of monitoring seems to be accepted by the players, who may see it as helpful to avoid harassment, and also helps to make WoW a family oriented war game.

The use of language is also controlled by the so called "Game Masters" (GMs), which usually are invisible for the players within the game. The GMs are “played” by employees of Blizzards Europe. According to a German press report, there are now 500 GMs working from a Parisian suburb (Müller 2007). According to the report of Edward Castranove (2007: 15) there are thousands of GMs worldwide. GMs might

be called by a player to solve an in-game problem, but they are also in charge of enforcing the players' compliance with the game's regulations. Given the fact that GMs are invisible to the players, unless they decide to appear on the screen, it is of little surprise that there so little research on the panoptical "World of Warcraft".

According to the job description, GMs also are requested to "follow official and non-official websites and forums to stay informed about the community" (Blizzard 2008), thus it becomes obvious that Blizzard does not limit surveillance to the game itself and the accompanying online services.

GMs also take part in what we may call "war on cheating", or more specifically "war on botting". Botting is the use of software agents (bots) by the players to ease their tasks. To explain why players use additional software to play a game (or even have software agents play instead of themselves) let us return shortly to how the game is played.

Like many other video games WoW demands high knowledge management skills to be played successfully (cf. Bergmann 2006). The user interface of WoW provides the players with a large number of statistical information, which at times is more important than the visual information of the actual game play. (For example, the question if a monster will attack a player will not depend on the distance between a character and a monster observable on the screen, but on numerical parameters and algorithms, which are partially unknown to the players.)[1] However, some players also use software provided by third parties – and banned by the "World of Warcraft®

[1] Training the ability to make decision based on information under time constrains is also what makes the use of video game style software interesting for military training in real life (Lenoir and Lowood 2005).

Terms of Use Agreement" – to ease the tasks. For example, tools may automatically heal members of the groups, which require help. But players may also use bots that take control over their own character to progress more quickly.

At the time of writing this paper Blizzard just sued Michael Donnelly, the creator of "Glider" (BBC 2008). Edward Castranova who provided a report for Blizzard on the damage of Glider botting estimates the overall damage on "$18 million per year in its North American operations" (Castranova 2007: 23). But we are not concerned with numbers in this multi million dollar industry here; however, it is interesting to have a look at the report, because it describes how Blizzard is struggling with bots like Glider. Obviously Blizzard is employing an automatic surveillance system, which in case of Glider fails, since the program is protected against automatic detection (idb., 24). Therefore, Blizzard has to deal with "hundreds of thousands of complaints about bots" (idb., p. 28) and "engages in manual bot detection, coordinates with GMs that receive complaints, and deploys an array of sensor algorithms designed to identity characters who are acting like bots" (ibd., p. 18). The reasons for fighting bots by surveillance and other means include keeping the balance of the game as well as marinating the immersive fantasy aspect for all players (idb., p. 18).

It is worth pointing out concerning the concept of war of WoW, that the "war on bots" marks a difference to real life warfare. Although, WoW does include elements of information warfare by stressing the importance of communication and the ability of the players to organize the battles without given precise orders, it does not include elements of "netcentric warfare" such as fully automatic weapon systems based on surveillance systems (Graham 2007, pp. 256f.). While in real life some authors are

arguing in favor of removing "humans in the loop" to accelerate the "kill chain", Blizzard is fighting bots to keep the players in the loop.

4. Conclusion

It might seem strange to address a game like "WoW" from the perspective of "information warfare". However, this contribution was in fact inspired by some reports on the interests by the military in analysing MMORPGs like "WoW" summed up by Philip Sarasin in his book on "Anthrax" (2004, pp. 24f.). We therefore ask ourselves about the possible links between "WoW" and the concept of information warfare.

As we have shown, there are different concepts of war underlying the game. On the one hand there is a romantic, pre-modern conception of war, on the other hand we can find elements of (post-)modern information warfare. Although WoW is actually not about war in a modern sense, because of the remarkable absence of mass-death and civilian casualties in the game, behind the facade "WoW" is a good example for infowar on different levels. Not only is the in-game warfare to be considered as being based on the capabilities of the players to communicate and exchange knowledge, but the efforts of Blizzard defending the game regulations to provide fair and balanced combats can be addressed from the perspective of information warfare.

As we have seen Blizzard relies on surveillance of different forms, e. g. to fend off botting companies, to deter players from cheating and so on. Thus, we have also pointed to the close connection between surveillance and information warfare, even if surveillance in "WoW" aims for creating a safe and secure place for an entertaining war.

Finally, we have shown that "WoW" does present a mix of different concepts of war, which contributes to make the game a rather surreal theatre of war.

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