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UWS 58a The Age of Distraction

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23 March 2022

## Escaping Online: Why World of Warcraft is the Most Addictive Game Ever Made

### **Introduction**

Since the introduction of video games into popular culture, some people have used games to escape from real-life stresses. Whether it be school, work, family, or any other issue, video games can serve as a distraction from the responsibilities and anxiety that real life creates. Over the last two decades, thousands of games have been released, with hundreds of millions of players. However, when considering the games people escape into, there is one title that stands out among the rest. Released by Blizzard entertainment in 2004, World of Warcraft (WoW) is quite possibly the most addictive game ever made. Newspaper articles, TV segments, and more, all warned of the dangers of playing this game, which was referred to by some as “digital crack.” What was it about WoW that made it so easy for people to become caught up in its world? My research will analyze the game and the community surrounding it to discover what about it was so alluring for so many people.

### **Preliminary Literature Review**

World of Warcraft is defined as an MMO, which stands for “Massively Multiplayer Online.” This means that WoW exists in a concurrent online server, where every player exists within the same bounds. The massively multiplayer part of MMO is a central focus of WoW, and many of its merits come from its ability to connect players with each other. In their paper, “Do World of Warcraft (MMORPG) Players Experience Less Loneliness and Social Anxiety in Online World (Virtual Environment) than in Real World (Offline)?” Marcel Martončík and Ján Lokša report on their study of 161 players to determine their levels of anxiety inside and outside the game. Using the UCLA

Loneliness scale and Social Phobia Inventory, the authors were able to get conclusive results. They note that the most important aspect of MMOs is the ability to form strong friendships in-game (128). Social contact is made easier in-game because factors that would affect real-world interaction such as ethnicity, attractiveness, and sexuality are nonfactors. Players in-game exist behind an anonymous avatar. The authors cite “Schlenker and Leary (1982, p. 642) [who] define social anxiety as an ‘anxiety resulting from the prospect or presence of personal evaluation in real or imagined social situations’” (Martončik and Lokša 128). A virtual world like that of WoW can help someone avoid the potential negative effects of social interaction and feel safer interacting than in real life (Martončik and Lokša 128). The study of 161 players found that WoW players experience less anxiety in WoW than in the real world, and those who make friendships and join groups within the game experience even less anxiety (130). This article confirms what I suspected, that players find some sort of reprieve from social anxiety inside WoW.

An interesting extension of this is described in “Do Coping Strategies Moderate the Relationship between Escapism and Negative Gaming Outcomes in World of Warcraft (MMORPG) Players?” by Lorelle Bowditch et al. Instead of focusing on loneliness and its impact on MMO players, this study focuses on the effect escapism has on outcomes from the game, whether playing to escape the real world leads to more negative results from playing than for someone who plays for another reason. The researchers evaluate different “coping styles” to categorize MMO players and find that escapism does not lead to an increased rate of negative outcomes from playing (Bowditch et al. 73). This suggests that playing to avoid adverse effects from social interaction (escapism) does not always mean that a player will have more negative effects from playing. This extends the Martončik research by showing that using WoW for escapism is not necessarily bad. An interesting thing to note from the Bowditch study is that one of the coping strategies that was found to be correlated with a desire for escapism was wishful thinking. This further suggests that WoW is

especially desirable to people unsatisfied with something in their life, leading to wishful thinking which can then manifest as escapism into the game.

Another interesting thing to note is that World of Warcraft, and video games as a whole, have a sort of stigma attached to them, that people who play them are bizarre or socially inept. Dimitri Williams explores this in his article “Who Plays, How Much, and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile,” and finds that the stereotypical gamer is just that, a stereotype. While men are the majority of people playing MMO games, women, on average, actually play them for more hours (Williams 1007). This is an interesting thing to think about and has implications on the perception of video games and the people playing them. Potentially false stereotypes and assumptions may stem from media portrayal of video games, as well as the opinions of older generations on video games. The average age of a gamer is 31.6, meaning that most people playing games are no older than Generation X (Williams 1007).

Overall, there has been considerable research on World of Warcraft and video games in general, analyzing how they relate to loneliness. Most of the research I have found so far agrees that those who get the most engrossed in a game like WoW are likely to struggle socially, but there are contradictions to this, especially when dissecting stereotypes.

## **Research Method**

My primary research method will be through the Brandeis Library One Search website. So far, I have found a good number of peer-reviewed articles about my topic, and with some more digging will hopefully be able to find a few more. For my keywords, I have a few main ones that I’ve used to find sources. The first one is “World of Warcraft.” I wanted to see what type of research has already been done on the game, and it turns out that there has been quite a bit. The majority of articles I found about the game were relatively recent, most dating back no further than 2015. There has been research done on multiple elements of the game, including the things I’m looking

for, mainly anxiety and loneliness and how it relates to play. Speaking of anxiety and loneliness, these were both keywords I used in One Search to get more catered results. I found some good articles about escapism in general, not just how it relates to video games that I might be able to use. To fill any gaps in what I can find with One Search, I will likely use Google Scholar a limited amount. I know that Google Scholar often gives a very large number of results, which could be good or bad depending on what I need to find. I am focusing mostly on articles written through the disciplinary lens of psychology. Most of the research around social behavior is through this lens, and it appears most suited to what I will be talking about in my paper.

### **Motive/Stakes**

With this research, I hope to discover the reasons people escape into video games, and how for some spending time in video games can be easier than spending time in real life. As one of gaming's most legendary (and infamous) titles, World of Warcraft serves as the perfect case study to explore this phenomenon. While there are an almost unlimited number of other games I could evaluate, WoW is perhaps the most popular and the most known for attracting people susceptible to viewing the game as more important than real life. I want to find out if there is a specific type of person who is susceptible to avoidance through video games and discover the factors that cause this susceptibility. Currently, I believe this type of negative avoidance is a consequence of a lack of satisfaction with one's life or anxiety around interaction. I believe WoW is so effective at drawing people in because it offers players an idealized version of themselves, as well as utilizing addictive mechanics and a focus on community that someone may be lacking outside the game. I think this research will be useful for others because this type of escapism is common but rarely discussed. Hopefully, this essay can make someone who reads it start thinking about it.

### **Timeline**

March 20-27:

I am writing this on March 20, and my research proposal is almost done. Over the next three days, I will continue to flesh out this proposal and make sure it meets all of the assignment requirements. Once I feel I have finished it, I will be going over the assignment sheet step by step to make sure it actually includes everything it needs.

March 27 - April 2:

The outline is due on March 30, so I'd like to make an initial rough outline by the 25th or 26th. Once I have a rough outline, I can iterate on it until it feels more complete. I am not bound by the outline, it is possible to change it later on, but I often struggle to retroactively change my outline once I've begun actual writing, so I want to make sure it is solid by the time I submit it.

April 2-16:

With the introduction due on April 11, I will spend most of this time working on that. I want to make sure my hook is solid, and that I give good context for the rest of the paper. The introduction will be very dependent on the quality of my outline because I will need to give a summary of the things I will be discussing over the course of the essay. An entire rough draft is due on the 13th, so I will want to finish the introduction with enough time to do the other parts of the essay. However, I will have a considerable amount of time to revise my rough draft, so I will likely spend most of this duration working on the introduction and on the cover letter which is also due on the 13th. The cover letter will not take me very long, so I'll dedicate most of this time to the introduction. I'd like to feel good about my introduction by April 7 or 8 so I then have the better part of a week to work on the rest of the rough draft.

April 16-23:

For most of this period I will be on break, so my goal is to get my peer reviews done immediately so I can spend most of the break focusing on my own essay. Hopefully, the

people doing peer review for me will also do their reviews towards the beginning of break, and I will have their feedback to consider before I really get into revision. I'd like to frontload most of this work, so I'll be happy if I can get this done early. The introduction is due on the 13th which is a Wednesday. I will try to get as much as possible done that Friday before I leave for break. I will try to do at least one entire peer review that Friday. Over the rest of the break, I will spend time revising each part of my rough draft using the feedback from my peers, and also changing what I personally think could be better.

April 23 - to May 2:

This entire multi-week period I will be focusing heavily on revision. I will try to break up revision, spending a few days on each of my main research paragraphs, and a few days on my conclusion and other paragraphs. I will try to evenly split revision over this time, although I will likely end up doing a lot at once when I inevitably fail to keep to this schedule.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Bowditch, Lorelle, et al. "Do Coping Strategies Moderate the Relationship between Escapism and Negative Gaming Outcomes in World of Warcraft (MMORPG) Players?" *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 86, 2018, pp. 69–76. *search.library.brandeis.edu*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.04.030>.

The main idea of this article is to determine whether coping strategies employed by a player have an impact on the relationship between escapism and negative in-game outcomes. This extends my other sources by providing explanations of how playing as an escapist coping strategy may affect people. This source will contribute to my research by giving me insight into the reasons people play WoW and how their ability to cope affects these reasons. This article concludes that players who play to

escape do not always experience negative outcomes, which complicated my idea that escaping into WoW can be bad for one's mental health.

Kokkini, Vasiliki, et al. "Immersed in World of Warcraft': A Discursive Study of Identity Management Talk About Excessive Online Gaming." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, Jan. 2022, p. 0261927X2110678. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X211067820>.

The main idea of this study is to explore how players view themselves and how their identity management can manifest in excessive gaming. This extends on my other sources by giving details into how WoW players view themselves, whereas my other sources mainly talk about WoW players instead of letting them do the talking. This source will contribute to my research by helping me form a basis for what an MMO player experiences firsthand. This source may be limited in its context, as the words of players recorded in this study may come from unique situations that may be different with more contextualization.

Martončík, Marcel, and Ján Lokša. "Do World of Warcraft (MMORPG) Players Experience Less Loneliness and Social Anxiety in Online World (Virtual Environment) than in Real World (Offline)?" *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 56, 2016, pp. 127-34. [search.library.brandeis.edu, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.11.035](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.11.035).

The main idea of this source is that players experience less social anxiety and loneliness inside WoW than in real life. This extends on my other sources that paint of picture of the type of person to play an MMO. This source will contribute to my research because it provides evidence for my claim that a reason people escape into video games is that they are less stressful than real life.

Williams, Dmitri, et al. "Who Plays, How Much, and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 4, July 2008, pp. 993–1018. *Silverchair*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2008.00428.x>.

The main idea of this source is that stereotypes about people who play video games are often false. This will complicate the arguments of my other sources because it debunks that people who play video games are also lonely and have social anxiety. This source will contribute to my understanding of the type of person who is likely to become engrossed in WoW. This source is potentially limited by its age, it is on the older end of acceptable studies being published 14 years ago.