

**PLAYING TO WIN: AN ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL
STRUCTURE IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT GUILDS**

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ABSTRACT

Video games are one of the most popular forms of entertainment today. With the advent of the internet, video game play has moved online to connect people across the world in virtual game spaces. Within online games, players often create organization like structures called guilds. This research examines the formation and nature of these guilds by integrating organizational theory with empirical data based on interviews with players. In doing so, this research identifies and highlights parallels between organizing to work and organizing to play. Themes related to organizational structure such as guild formation, player recruitment, role segregation, player morale, and internal competition are explored.

INTRODUCTION

What started out as a niche market to only the most dedicated customers has quickly escalated into a mainstream industry (Chang 2009). The video game industry is skyrocketing as a form of entertainment, recently surpassing the movie industry in terms of annual revenues. PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates the global sales of videogames to be around \$37.5 billion (Reuters, 2007). Video games are especially interesting due to the social interactions that form within and around the games. Video games give people the opportunity to come together, to work together, to set goals, and use teamwork to achieve these goals (Williams 2006). Many tasks in video games are designed to be challenging for a single player, or even a few players to accomplish. Hence, team-work and joint achievement of goals play a critical role in games. The need for teamwork results in group formation – both temporary and enduring. These more enduring groups are known as guilds. Specifically, guilds are semi-persistent groups – they can exist over periods of time, but are not permanent (Choi, 2008). Many guilds have mission statements, recruitment policies and procedures, and other mechanisms that can be seen in common use in business organizations (Williams, 2006).

This research examines the social experiences relating to the guild experience in online gaming. More specifically, the current research focuses on how guilds form, are organized into roles, and shape social relationship formation among players. Within the context of World of Warcraft – a massively multiplayer online game (MMO), this research finds that guild members interact in a manner similar to employees in a business organization to generate synergy and function efficiently to successfully complete tasks and achieve long-run goals. This research highlights the organizational structure and processes within guilds, their purpose and effectiveness, and how they affect the social experience for the players within the guild. Within the World of Warcraft community, the composition of guilds reflects a hierarchal structure

similar to what one may find in a corporation. By exploring these research questions, this research advances a better understanding of the similarities between work and play as well as between organizational structure and guild formation within video games.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Interactions and Online Games

Online video games, and especially massively multiplayer games, enhance the ability for conversation and interaction within a game's real-time environment. Additionally, players experience enhanced opportunities to build enduring individual and group relationships. This is a result of online games integrating diverse channels of communication and better methods for players to cooperate (Yee 2009). With increasing technology and a new generation of tech-savvy people coming of age, the lines between interpersonal experiences and relationships in the real and fantasy worlds begins to blur. As observed by Taylor (2006): "The sociality of the space is not simply a matter of players talking to each other but a web of networks and relationships – sometimes weaving between on- and offline life, in-game and out-game – developing, and disintegrating, over time" (p. 30). These networks and relationships provide players with a sense of community and unity. Thus, online games involve a large number of people sharing an environment to play a common game. Communication patterns within online games involve both relationship establishment and management. These patterns are enabled through public channels that are designed within the game (Yee 2009). Additionally, there are private channels that groups of friends can create for their personal use. For example, the "Looking For Group" matchmaking system brings people together for quests and dungeons and enhances the sense of community within the game.

The social nature of games is especially relevant in the MMO (Massively Multiplayer

Online) genre. Specifically, MMO games create entire virtual worlds for hundreds and thousands of people to gather, interact, share experiences and stories, and work together to accomplish a wide variety of tasks (Ducheneaut and Moore 2004). MMOs are often expansive and open-ended, rather than focused on a single gameplay purpose or goal (Wagner 2009). Unlike traditional games that often appeal to a specific audience (e.g., shooting games attracting people that enjoy the fast-paced competition of dodging bullets), MMOs appeal to a broad spectrum of players. This includes players who like to explore, collect, make money and buy fancy trinkets, socialize, compete in sport, and players who enjoy feelings of growth and progress within the game. Indeed, one key factor in the popular appeal of MMOs is the free-flowing, multi-faceted environment in the game which allows unconstrained decision-making for players (Yee 2004).

With so many unique types of players coming together to share a virtual world, it is undeniable that an incredible amount of interesting social experiences occur. Each player develops their unique style of game play while also contributing to their community. Indeed, each individual's experience is shaped by his/her social connections, collective knowledge, and group experiences (Taylor 2006). But it is only when players reach the highest levels of their character, that they begin to truly experience the culture within the game. It is at this point that many players choose to join a guild.

The Guild Experience

Guilds can range from small groups of friends to large groups of strangers who join for a common goal or purpose (Williams 2006). Guilds can serve multiple functions, from providing a social “hangout” for people to providing the structure and organization necessary for a group of individuals to overcome challenging tasks within the game (Choi 2008). Social guilds that primarily cater to the social experiences of players are referred to as “casual” guilds, and are less focused on the end-game challenges. Other guilds, however, are competitive and emphasize

challenges and achievement of goals at the end of the game. They often engage in weekly or even daily tasks in order to meet a certain goal. These guilds are often structured, focused, and motivated, and as such have been coined as “serious” guilds. Regardless of how serious the guild is, all guilds depend on strong social ties and mechanisms (Taylor 2006).

Guilds function like companies in that they gather individuals with a specific skill set to perform specific tasks. Specialized skills facilitate groups of players to achieve both short-term and long-term goals. There are systems of internal status development and maintenance, guild pride and recognition in the community, trust, responsibility, and socialization (Taylor 2006). In addition, guilds exhibit many of the same qualities and practices as emerging organizations such as intentionality, resources, boundary, and exchange (Katz and Gartner 1988). Specifically, the resource-based view of firms suggests that a firm is as a pool of resources that include both physical and intangible resources (Wernerfelt 1984). Similarly, guilds can be viewed as pools of resources. Physical resources in guilds refer to both raw and crafted materials that can be used to aid in achieving and implementing goals within the game. Intangible resources include the set of knowledge amassed within the guild about class techniques, crafting requirements, knowledge about boss encounters, and various other types of knowledge. Clearly, as guilds increase their amounts of resources, they enhance their chances at achieving their goals.

In addition, as organizations mature, employee acquisition and retention acquire critical importance. Similarly, recruitment, socialization to fit norms, conflict resolution procedures, and reward systems are central to inspire motivation among players in a guild (Choi 2008). Another key characteristic of organizations is employee morale (Stowe 2007). High employee morale is linked to high worker effort, high expected profits, and high worker retention (Stowe 2007). Competitiveness in organizations also impacts worker effort and output: a level of “healthy” competition can create a favorable increase in performance (Krishnan 2002). In addition,

members and potential members of organizations often have expectations about the organizational environment, such a “family-friendly” environment, fair pay and benefits levels, and management’s support of the employees. Themes such as recruitment of players (analogous to recruitment of employees), internal competition (analogous to competitiveness in organizations) and player morale (analogous to employee morale) are manifested in our interviews with guild members.

Next, the methodology used in this research is discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the key findings. Finally, I identify future research directions in the discussion section.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this study is primarily netnographic, as the communities, cultures, and experiences occur in an online setting (Kozinets 1997). Data collection includes participant observation, both face to face and telephone interviews with players, as well as data collected from gaming message boards and guild websites.

Netnographic Site

World of Warcraft or WOW is the world’s largest MMO and has over 11 million active players. The scale of World of Warcraft is reflected in the fact that if WOW was a country, it would be the 75th largest country in the world (Supadupagama 2008).

The playing environment within WOW is divided into “realms.” A realm is an isolated copy of the game space that is inhabited by a fraction of the total playing population. Due to the technical limitations of game server space and the practical limitations of how many people can comfortably coexist in the limited game space, each realm is home to a few thousand players. Within each realm is a virtual world of wide plains, tall mountains, running rivers, vast oceans, small towns, large cities, and many other landscape features. These landscapes are the setting for

the countless social interactions that occur within the game. In many ways, interaction sequences can initiate and commence in the same way as they would in the real-world. Characters travel through the world and encounter other players and speak aloud (via text) to initiate conversation. They can also use body language “emoticons” that can be visually and textually observed by those nearby, adding depth to the interaction. In addition, players can “whisper” to other players in the game regardless of their location, the World of Warcraft equivalent of a cell phone call. Furthermore, players can speak into a “general channel” that everyone in the current zone can see – comparable to having everyone in your current town receiving a message. There is also a guild channel, which allows easy communication between the members of a guild. Interaction within the game space is often supplemented by mediums outside the game space, most commonly in the form of Ventrillo (Voice over IP) or websites.

In this study, the focus is on “serious” guilds, which is defined here as a guild that participates in end-game raids on a weekly basis. Raids are dungeons that require 10 or 25 players to defeat bosses and reward the best gear and items in the game. These guilds are generally comprised of committed gamers that play more than casual, social gamers. These guilds are built on foundations of leadership-driven motivation and guidance to achieve set goals. They are also structured to facilitate effective communication and exchange of information, which can occur in-game or on the websites that the vast majority of these guilds maintain. These guilds require commitment and cooperation from their members, as the ultimate goal is to overcome the challenges presented in the game and compete against other guilds. Since new game content is released on a regular basis, guilds engage in a never-ending cycle of business-like competition to be the first and the best in the community.

Netnographic Methods

Data was primarily collected through participant observation in the online setting. After a month of preliminary research on the game and the community, as well as online conversations with various members of the community, a game account was purchased. To acclimate to the gameplay and to develop a connection within the community, the researcher leveled up an in-game character to level 80, the maximum level a character can attain. Over the next year, the researcher became a member of seven different guilds and spoke with members regarding their experiences.

Much of the data is based on in-game conversations and conversations in Ventrillo, a VoIP technology that allows players to engage in verbal conversation with each other. These are the primary two means by which players within a guild communicate with each other. In addition, approximately 15 guild websites were examined. These websites served as rich sources of information, as most guilds laid out their procedures for new applicants on these websites. The researcher also examined the World of Warcraft forums, as they provide a meeting ground for members of guilds to come together and share their experiences with the community. Further, the author conducted six in-depth interviews with a variety of players from different guilds (see Table 1 for an overview of the participant characteristics in the interviews). These interviews covered general topics related to WoW, in addition to specific questions about each player's current and past guild experience and procedures. Table 2 provides an overview of the various stages in data collection.

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here.]

Analysis began immediately during the observation period and follows the grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin 1998). As data was gathered, open coding procedures were used to analyze them. Conversations, interviews, and websites were analyzed by line which

resulted in emergent themes. Once the central themes were identified, they were linked via axial coding procedures to create a framework of the interrelations between the themes. The central theme of organizational structure as a core element of the guild experience emerged through selective coding.

FINDINGS

Themes related to organizational structure emerged within the guild environment of World of Warcraft. There are strong elements of teamwork, hierarchies, and focused goal setting, which in turn have a significant impact on the social experiences of players within a guild setting. Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee, and Nickell (2006) detail the ways that game mechanics and environments significantly impact the social interaction with online games, particularly World of Warcraft. Social interaction can only occur in places where it is allowed and/or fostered by the environment. Specifically, analysis of the data suggests that much of the end-game content requires more than mere social interactions within the game to succeed. The most challenging adventures in the game, known as raids, require an incredible amount of strategy, communication, and cooperation. These raids require many skilled players to work together in synergy, which requires shared information about player dynamics. Raids require specialized decision-making skills on the parts of players. Many events during raids occur spontaneously which in turn requires players to think on-the-fly. Since raids require up to 25 skilled players and may last in excess of 8 hours (often broken into numerous sessions by the players), a level of consistency, organization, group collaboration, and trust are critical elements of a successful raid encounter. These needs appear to be the most powerful sources which drive the creation and maintenance of “serious” guilds within World of Warcraft. In an attempt to meet these needs and maintain a functional group of motivated players, guilds often (purposefully or unintentionally) reflect specific organizational processes within their social framework. What

follows is a discussion of five major organizational processes within guilds and their social implications: (1) guild formation, (2) recruiting procedures, (3) role segregation, (4) environmental comfort and maintenance, and (5) internal competition. Table 3 provides an overview of these five themes and the similarities between guilds and organizations based on these themes.

[Insert Table 3 about here.]

Guild Formation

The need for community is one of the strongest driving forces within World of Warcraft. As players progress through the game, many players join a guild. In the course of searching for a guild, a player might conclude that no guild completely fits their values and that they have something new to offer to the community. In other instances, a division in leadership may dissolve a guild to bring about the formation of new guilds. Guild formation provides new outlets for expression, congregation, teamwork, and social experience for members. The creators of guilds provide the sense of community within guilds, which plays a critical role for players. This is similar to creators of companies and chief executives, who set goals and mission statements for companies. The following is an excerpt from a speech given by a guild leader to a few members who would help him rebuild after a guild failed due to its leader disappearing:

“We really don’t have a choice. Will’s gone, and we have no sense of direction. The people who are trying to lead the guild now don’t have the leadership skills for it. We’re going to start over, and build this guild on focus and respect. If I hear anyone telling others to “shut up,” you’re getting kicked. We’re not going to have anyone upset other players and chase them off. We need to start recruiting and start getting stuff done - the biggest reason we’ve had so many people leave over the last few months is the lack of leadership and the lack of progression. So get out there and find people...let them know we’re fun people but that we also mean business.” (Dan, 24, male)

As he rallies his remaining troops, Dan instills the essence of what he hopes the new guild will be to his guildmates. This speech is motivating; certainly being a part of a newly

formed guild can provide players with a new purpose. Guild formation truly is a team process. For example, it requires 10 players to sign a guild charter before it becomes a guild and the founding members need to embrace what the guild stands for and promote a positive image in the WoW community. On the same note, guild formation and early growth rely heavily on strong leadership. Guilds with leaders like Dan are more likely to have a focus necessary to succeed and grow into stronger guilds. Charter members of the guild and people in the community feel more self-confident and optimistic about the future if they encounter leaders with vision and an aura of power and command.

Once guild members have a general guideline of the principles on which they want to build their guild, the next step is for the guild to sell itself to other players. This is the phase where the guild grows from a startup guild to an established guild. One player summed up the early growth process:

“When you first start a new guild, it will be first securing a base of new people that you know can attend raids and don’t suck. After that, it will be recruiting people. Then it will be along the lines of acquiring commodities for your guild such as mats, flasks, and such. Then after that, it will just be focusing your skills and teamwork to fight bosses.” (Matt, 20, male)

As the above quote suggests, guilds start with the base, a diverse group of people that can cover the core processes of the guild. The two core processes include class roles and profession roles. Class roles define what types of tasks a player will undertake in raids, such as dealing damage or healing the members of the group. These processes directly relate to the objectives of the guild, such as participating in raid activities. Profession roles define what type of goods a player will craft from raw materials found in the game, such as leatherworking, jewelcrafting, or engineering. These roles provide the support necessary for guilds to succeed by providing resources to the guild members.

Recruiting Procedures

Every organization starts with a few people. As tasks become more complex, organizations feel the pressure to recruit more people to further their cause. It is organizationally prudent to increase the size of the organization to better handle competition in the market and to achieve increased profits (Carneiro 2007). This element emerged as a critical factor to a guild's success in World of Warcraft. Recruiting the most diverse, talented, and focused member base allows the guild to most effectively accomplish its raiding goals. Recruiting procedures are also important from a public relations standpoint; the standards by which one judges applicants sends a signal to other players about the quality of the guild. Recruitment can take two forms. Either, players face recruitment procedures as a challenge that they must overcome to further their progress in the game. These challenges can evoke diverse emotional responses from players that range from "invigorating" to "frustrating". Or, guild officers choose players since their role is not only to ensure that they accept the quality players into their guild, but also to deliver a message to the community about how serious the guild is. One player sums up the recruiting process of his guild:

"Then Virulence (a guild) is a lot better. They recruit for what they need, they have dedicated people who show up, get stuff done with the group they have. They don't recruit any more than they need, don't recruit any more than they want. If you don't make the cut, you don't make the cut...come back later and try again." (Drew, male, 20)

This story sums up the essence of effective recruitment in guilds, a theme similar to recruitment in companies. Companies must walk a fine line of hiring enough employees to complete all necessary tasks and service all the customers but not hiring too many and paying salaries to idle employees (Primus 2009). If a guild recruits too many players, it is essentially over-extending its resources. The challenge guilds face is to build a guild that is not too big that players can't participate or don't receive an adequate amount of resources, but also not too small

such that the group lacks the versatility, which can adversely affect their success in raids. Players in large guilds are often frustrated due to lack of attention, as can be seen in Drew's explanation of one of his earlier guild experiences: "Pretty much everyone was accepted unless you had sucky gear. And when you get accepted, you're gonna get benched until somebody doesn't show that's supposed to, then you're in. You're in for a couple bosses, then you're out again." Large guilds leave many people feeling isolated, unaccomplished, and unneeded. Conversely, guilds that are too small can often leave people feeling unrewarded, unable to overcome challenges, and helpless. The existence of a "sweet spot" in terms of guild size is possibly explained by looking at the guild size sampling conducted by Williams et al. (2006). The authors note a pattern where there is a slight increase in the number of "large" guilds compared to "moderately sized" guilds and "very large" guilds.

The recruiting procedures themselves are often familiar practices to the players within the game. Most guilds require the applicant to fill out an application, just like companies. The rigorousness of the application seems to be related to the commitment of the guild to raiding and achievement. Nearly every relatively serious guild has a website, and almost every one of these websites has an application section for players. These applications generally contain questions that pertain to the knowledge, skill, and availability of the players. Written applications are commonly followed by interviews and "test runs." This process can be overwhelming for some, as detailed by the following story:

"Their recruitment process was overwhelming! The application took me over an hour to fill out...then it was posted on their forums for me to be publicly grilled by all their members! They called me out on anything they didn't find to be perfect – my gear, my talents, my achievements. Then an officer rejected me without me even having a chance to defend myself. I felt degraded, but was at least consoled by the realization that I wouldn't really want to be in a guild with people with an attitude like that anyways."
(Travis, male, 17)

Noteworthy in this quote is that, despite the frustration of rejection and humiliation, Travis feels relieved when he realizes that the members of the guild were too elitist for his taste. The application process, from start to end, is often one of the best ways for players to get a grasp of how well they would fit in a guild. Players often learn something about how to better play their class through responses to information they've provided in their application, such as types of gear they should wear, how they should spend their character's talent points, etc. The application process can also be a great social experience for the players in the guild. Guild members can start to develop relationships with the applicants and can see how they respond to criticism. The type of people that apply to the guild can also serve as a signal to guild members about the type of image that the guild wants to present to the community.

Role Segregation

A basic element of World of Warcraft is that different classes have different sets of skills, different strengths and weaknesses, and can do only a small percentage of all the tasks required at various points throughout the game. This goes deeper than the typical tank/healer/damage dealer divisions. Each of the four classes that possess the ability to heal in World of Warcraft has a different set of healing spells. Druid healers use many spells that heal targets slowly over time, paladin healers use spells that heal targets for large amounts all at once, and priest healers use spells that shield targets from taking damage. Although each of these classes does the job of healing, each possesses a different skill set. As such, each type of healer varies in their ability to successfully tackle the various healing tasks.

From a guild's stance, it is beneficial to the raiding experience to assemble the most varied team possible. This ensures that regardless of the task, the guild will have the skills necessary to succeed. From this standpoint, a guild functions very similar to an organization. Any type of group that works toward a common goal strives for diversity, as diversity is related

to a larger cumulative skill set and more creative solutions to problems. Companies with diverse employees have higher levels of performance and innovation (Miller 2009). This need for a balanced team puts stress on a guild, often to the point that they will begin headhunting players of the desired skill set from other guilds or the community in general.

Another interesting characteristic of role segregation in guilds within World of Warcraft is the placement of players in positions they're needed for rather than where they desire to be.

“It gets so frustrating. I'm the only priest in my guild, and we are always short on healers. I've always wanted to go shadow, but the officers make me stay holy to heal. Between that and people in the guild telling me I'm terrible at shadow, it makes playing the priest really frustrating. It's why I try to play my death knight more than my priest now.” (Joey, male, 19)

An interesting dynamic can be seen in this quote. To participate in the guild activities, Joey must often go against his will as to how he would like to play the game. There are two key issues with this. First, Joey is unable to play the position which he would derive the most enjoyment. Second, by playing “holy”, he receives gear for the healing position and receives no “shadow” gear. In the long run, this makes it more difficult for him to ever switch back to the shadow position because he is properly equipped for the same level of game play. This is the World of Warcraft equivalent of a man of 35 realizing his passion lies in a different field of business. For him to switch, he needs to start at a lower level and gain the skills and experience in the new field to ascend to the level he was at in his old field.

Player Morale and Regulatory Procedures

Players need environmental comfort, coworker and leader approval, and positive rewards to thrive during in-game activities. These aspects of the guild experience affect a player's morale. This morale can exist on various levels: A player must become comfortable with his or her character, knowledge of the game, and must become comfortable with the guild environment. Physical comfort in the player's computer space can also affect his or her attitude and experience

with World of Warcraft. The former is exemplified in Drew's story about his initial experience with WoW:

“I made a Night Elf Hunter, but I could never really get the hang of it. I could never get the hang of questing. It took too long and there was very little reward in it. I played it mostly just to hang out with my girlfriend, to be able to talk to her. And then Burning Crusade came out and I could be a Blood Elf, and I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is the best class ever. I love this character. This is sexy. I want to look at this all day.’ I made a Paladin and it became fun to level.” (Drew, male, 20)

This comment is noteworthy because it shows how important morale is for many players. Lack of comfort or an enjoyable atmosphere can be one of the leading causes for people to leave a guild or to quit the game. Contrary to popular stereotype, many people who play WoW are not only very social, but play WoW specifically for the social interactions that they can have with other players. If players find that the social atmosphere is lacking, hostile, or otherwise undesirable within their guild, they often move to another guild.

Guild leaders understand this, and many different types of organizational procedures can be laid out within guilds to try to maintain guild member morale and comfort. One of the first things that might come to mind is a code of conduct. Whether it is written out on the guild website or verbalized to the guild by the guild leaders, almost all serious guilds have a set of rules to guide the actions of their players. Rules regarding many common organizational issues are generally present – rules governing appropriate actions between members, attendance policies, insubordination, etc. These rules parallel rules that may exist in many organizations covering the same issues. Rules may also govern such things as performance, loot distribution, and conflict resolution. Rules, however, are often seen by players as a double-edged sword: They are necessary to maintain order and promote positive attitude, but too many rules can be overbearing and detrimental to the “fun” aspect of the game. This is a challenge for not only all

serious guilds, but companies as well. They must create an environment that is structured enough to be productive, but relaxed enough to promote friendly, social, and positive attitudes.

The procedure that has the most significant effect on the social experience of players in a guild is the procedure for conflict resolution. Regardless of the makeup of the guild, there will always be some level of conflict that surfaces. If the conflict is not resolved, one or more of the parties involved will inevitably leave the guild. Unlike work environments, where people are often forced to endure unsavory coworkers due to financial obligations, people will very quickly choose to leave a guild if they find that there is frequent conflict between members of the guild. It becomes a high priority for guild leaders to resolve conflict in order to keep the talented players in the guild. Drew provided an apt example:

“In Press Start, there was a bit of a thing where people saw the officers as having God complexes, so issues were never really resolved, people would just quit. Then in Gruesome, if an issue presented itself and the problem is a friend of the officers, nothing ever happened. What did you see? Nothing...nothing happened, ignore it. If you're not a friend of the officers, you're called out publicly, probably called moronic, maybe kicked. Virulence is the best - you'll probably be called a retard the entire time, but it's fun. Nobody takes it too seriously, and you fix it. Other than that, I've never seen any big issues here.”

Note how the different methods to deal with conflict have varying outcomes on the stability of the guild atmosphere. If guild leaders ignore the issues or didn't act in a fair, reasonable manner, people become upset and eventually leave the guild.

Internal Competition

As guilds begin to mature and progress, they try to sharpen their skills and progress into more challenging game content. As they progress farther, each player needs to be at the top of their game in order for the guild to succeed. As the fights get more difficult, players may become overburdened with duties. They may become stressed and cut corners in order to make their own job easier. If a player isn't taking the time to learn how to perform the tasks they need to perform

properly, it will result in a sub-par outcome. One way for the organization to keep all the guild members on their game, while rewarding those who perform the strongest, is to create some amount of internal competition between the members. In the business world, there is a significant link between competitiveness and effort (Krishnan 2002). The same link exists within guilds, where competition, with appropriate rewards, will keep players on the top of their game.

Consider this quote by the leader of a guild:

“Hopefully we’ll be able to shed some weight from our ranks soon. Aemis is just too casual and unfocused. Why do you think I let all these hunters in? But we’ll see who does the best and see who shows up the most...then we’ll cut the others if we need to.” (Scott, 20, male)

This quote shows the urgency and seriousness of the situation some players face. In this case, Aemis started to perform at a level that helped ensure him a spot in the guild. He saw that his position was in jeopardy, and stepped up his game to prove that he was worthy of keeping it. However, serious guilds always feel the need to do better. When players don’t pull their weight, they are either encouraged to perform stronger or replaced in the guild completely.

But the rewards for such competition are as great as the perils. Most players agree that they enjoy a bit of competition between the members of their guild. Even though the guild works together toward a common goal, a bit of competition adds more sport to the game. Players may learn to focus on their task, perform more efficient actions, or grow in other ways. Although it occurs at varying levels, many guilds take a page from the sales field book and run their looting system on a sort of commission system. Players who show up the most, perform all elements of their job the best, and avoid costly mistakes have the highest priority at receiving the loot as it is obtained. Although most guilds try to be fair and cycle through the members of the guild evenly, people are often punished for making mistakes or underperforming by missing out on a piece of loot. This type of competition to perform better than one’s peers generally has a positive effect

on the performance of guilds in raids. It is also rewarding for players, as they understand that by receiving a new or special piece of loot, they are a hard-working, respected member of the team. Players that take competition to heart and combine it with a desire to succeed in the game have a better experience.

DISCUSSION

The Nature of Business in Play

This research examines the organizational structures that exist within fun-centered activities such as video game play. Specifically, within the context of WOW, this research investigates the emergence and formation of player guilds. Empirical findings based upon a combination of netnography and face to face interviews with WOW players highlights the parallels between player guilds and organizations. Key organizational processes such as guild formation, recruitment, player morale and internal competition that underlie “play” within guilds are identified. These findings suggest that creation of a guild is similar to the creation of a company, requiring strong leadership, motivated members, and ample resources. Recruitment procedures in both companies and guilds make use of applications and interviews to evaluate potential members in an effort to develop the most efficient size workforce to achieve its goals. Both types of organizations employ hierarchies and specialization tactics, recruiting a diverse workforce to be able to handle the greatest number of challenges. These organizations are concerned with maximizing the morale of their members and providing comfortable work environments through conflict management and other regulatory procedures. Finally, companies and guilds alike instill a sense of competition to motivate workers and increase productivity.

In addition to the organization structure of guilds, guilds and organizations also share commonalities in the emotional experiences that are evoked. Although overall enjoyable, the

guild experience also underlies frustration as players strive to overcome challenges that are often key long-term goals of guilds. Interestingly, similar emotions are observed in the world of business. Workers experience a variety of emotions relating to the working conditions, salaries and benefits, work expectations, and peer/superior relationships (Cheung 2009). Employees may experience stress while struggling to keep up with their workload, receiving pay they consider insufficient, or dealing with unsavory coworkers. In addition, many people encounter stress and frustrations attempting to balance their work lives and their personal lives (Bourne 2009). This is all too common of a challenge for online gamers, as well, who often struggle to find the balance between the commitments they may encounter in-game and their personal life outside the game.

Similar to employees in an organization, guilds also evoke diverse social experiences for players. Guild members often struggle with whether the roles they have been assigned in the guild are best suited for their set of skills. In addition, just as “fitting within a team” in an organization is critical, WoW players also seek out groups of like-minded and competent people, who can work together in synergy in a team to achieve goals within the guild. Further, players are willing to accept rules, guidelines, and other imposed restrictions inherent in guilds because it contributes to greater success and accomplishment.

The similarity in experiences between the work-place and play worlds, suggests that much can be learned about how a person can behave in the business world by examining their interactions within guilds that exist within online games. In particular, online games are one of the key platforms where players employ the most advanced technology to create social connections and share information. In a vast majority of these games, the stage on which these interactions are performed is a fantastic environment with mythical creatures and other fantastic activities. Hence, the organization-like processes described in this research are embedded within the context of fantasy and play. As Taylor (2006) suggests, work and play are no longer separate

realms, but rather two properties that intertwine. Some players take the games so seriously that they become consumed by greed and lose grasp of the fun in the game, while other players find they must work by performing repetitive tasks in order to attain a higher level of fun. These organizational processes further highlight the blurring of boundaries between work and play (Taylor 2006), and reveal the highly structured rules that contribute to player enjoyment and engagement within the game.

Despite the popularity of online games such as WoW, research on the similarities between organizations and games is limited. For example, a key finding here is the importance of decision-making skills in maintaining a successful guild experience. Although the substantive content of tasks between online games and organizations differ, it is clear that decision making and critical thinking skills exist in both domains. Whether and how these skills transfer between the domains of play and work is an area of future research. Similarly, future research can examine how personal relationships develop between guilds members and compare them with the relationships that can develop between coworkers at companies. Another interesting area that requires further investigation is the nature of compensation in guilds. Currently, guild members are compensated through elaborate reward systems, most of which either award gear based on player performance or player need for better gear. Other systems involve players earning points through performance and then using those points to buy rewards. One could also explore whether such compensation structures could be developed in corporate organizations.

The similarities between player guilds and organizations have significant implications on the business world. Researchers go as far as to say that online games are training the skills in the business leaders of tomorrow (Reeves 2008). The research of Reeves, Malone, and O'Driscoll (2008) shows that many of the qualities of current business trends, such as geographically dispersed teams, lack of formal authority, need for rapid response to change, and short duration

of teams, also exist within online games. They suggest that players who experience these online games over significant periods of time will develop skills in leadership, risk consideration, and role versatility. The link between guilds and business can be advantageous for companies.

Companies can use guilds as a recruiting platform, either by using them to test the skills and evaluate the qualities of applicants who play or by examining guild history as a type of work experience. The in-game guild environment can also be used as a training, skill building, and team building exercise with other members of the company. Companies may implement techniques used by guilds to increase member morale and loyalty, such as a more immediate reward system or the greater attentiveness to member needs that result from the open nature of guild expression. Findings also show the significance of role rotation, as member morale will surely drop if they find themselves trapped in the same mundane routine. Companies may benefit from the idea of increasing friendly competition, with rewards being as simple as a non-monetary prize for excellent performance, such as an extra casual dress day. With business in a constant state of evolution, it's clear that businesses need to adapt to stay ahead of the competition. The online gamers of today are the leaders of tomorrow (Reeves 2008), so we should take advantage of what we can learn from them.

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TABLE 1
List of Participants for In-Depth Interviews

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Length of WoW Career</i>
Dan	24	Male	1 Year
Matt	20	Male	2 Years
Drew	20	Male	3 Years
Travis	17	Male	2 Years
Jared	19	Male	2 Years
Austin	21	Male	2 Years

TABLE 2
Sequence of Data Collection

Step 1	Account Creation, Character Creation, Character Leveling
Step 2	Guild Search – Forum and Website Examination
Step 3	Netnographic Immersion – Online Conversations and Informal Interviews with Players
Step 4	Face to Face In-Depth Interviews with WoW Players

TABLE 3
Key Empirical Themes – Similarities Between Organizations and Guilds

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Guild</i>	<i>Player Quote</i>
Guild Formation	Organizations may form with ideas for a new product or service to offer to the community. Organizations may also emerge from a failed idea that is modified to better suit the market.	Guilds may result from players having something new to offer to the community or as a result from broken leadership in another guild.	“Will hasn't been on in weeks...we really need to reform the guild so we can have more organized leadership” (Dan, 24)
Recruiting Procedures	Companies recruit skilled people who will add to synergy within the company. Applications and interviews are standard procedure.	Guilds recruit skilled players who will increase the guild's chances for success in raids. Applications and interviews are standard procedures.	“The process was simple, recruit active players to progress through the game, the procedure was promoting your guild with your skills and trying to leave an impression of professionalism and entertainment as to lure in skilled players.” (Austin, 21)
Role Segregation	Employees are divided into departments by their skills and duties. Employees within departments generally have a specific set of duties to perform on a regular basis.	Guild members are assigned specific roles based on the skills inherent to their class. Each player participates in their role based on their class and skills.	“You are a member of a team trying to complete a common goal and you are given a role to help the process. If you fail, your team fails, so it is very much like real life.” (Jared, 19)

TABLE 3
Key Empirical Themes – Similarities Between Organizations and Guilds

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Guild</i>	<i>Player Quote</i>
Player Morale and Regulatory Procedures	Companies create a comfortable work environment, respond to the needs of its employees, and engage in conflict resolution between employees to ensure high employee morale for maximum productivity.	Guilds create a fun play environment, respond to the individual needs and goals of the players, and engage in conflict resolution between members to ensure high morale for maximum performance.	“I loved being in a guild, I think it is a necessary participation if you want to really appreciate the game. It was the best way for me to connect with other people in the guild- not only by meeting new people, but also developing strong and lasting friendships.” (Matt, 23)
Internal Competition	Companies create an atmosphere of friendly competition with rewards to encourage effort, creativity, and productivity.	Guilds create an atmosphere of friendly competition to encourage effort, attendance, and performance during guild related activities such as raids.	“There’s always competition in the guild. Everyone’s trying to one-up each other every fight, bragging about how much damage they’re doing. It really gives people something to focus on.” (Travis, 17)