



GAME ON

Online games like World of Warcraft get a bad rap. But after spending time with a few avid gamers, **Andrew Osthoff** realizes the benefits may outweigh the so-called harms. Photos by **Amanda Pointer**.

Several nights a week, Tim Eisenbeisz is responsible for the lives of nine other people. Were his attention to lag for mere seconds, they would be beaten, sliced, or burned to death. Nearby, Matt Wohlsdorf wades into combat, parrying blows that would crush any normal being. Without his practiced skill, Wohlsdorf's comrades would surely be overrun.

During their weekly adventures in World of Warcraft (or WoW), players constantly depend on one another. However, while Eisenbeisz and Wohlsdorf met through a mutual friend, most of their group, known as "The Black Watch," has never been face-to-face. If not for the game, they never would have met at all. Fortunately, hundreds of miles don't affect virtual battles.

While WoW is not the first game to offer an online world where players can gather, it is the most successful. Originally released by video game giant Blizzard Entertainment on November 23, 2004, World of Warcraft now has 11.5 million subscribers worldwide—more people than the population of New York City or Cuba. Since its launch, the game has spun off into a comic book series, tabletop games, and a handful of novels. Plans for a World of Warcraft movie directed by Sam Raimi have also been announced.

On its path to becoming a gaming monolith, however, WoW has also become synonymous with video game addiction. Parents and psychologists often cite the alleged dangers of online games, usually claiming players are sucked into a system that gives them a false sense of achievement. Often the fear is, at worst, players will lose interest in socializing; at best, they may lose touch with reality. The “average WoW player” is often imagined as someone socially ill-equipped, mentally unstimulated, and host to a bad hygiene problem.

Neither Eisenbeisz nor Wohlsdorf reflect this stereotype. Eisenbeisz’s goatee and straight, shoulder-length hair give him a slightly wild appearance reminiscent of Guy Fawkes, but his measured speech and sharp, intelligent eyes belie this impression. Wohlsdorf describes the game using sport analogies—a departure from the typical gamer vocabulary—and he certainly doesn’t smell bad. Both college students are friendly and quick to grin while explaining why they play the game.

In fact, if either man were a social misfit, he would have less success in killing monsters. In order to conquer the

game’s hardest portions, each player must know not only their own responsibilities, but also be able to effectively diagnose and discuss strategies with teammates.

Eisenbeisz describes WoW and other massively multiplayer games as providing a way to socialize while focusing on challenges, similar to sports. But unlike physically active events, the focus in WoW is exclusive to mental skill. That mix of brainpower and close teamwork is hard to find outside video games. “I’m not the sort of person who goes out to bars,” Eisenbeisz says, smiling. “It’s hard for me to get into social gatherings.”

Though he is generally relaxed and easygoing, Eisenbeisz says it’s easier to have meaningful conversations with others while they are connected through activities requiring mental prowess. “Our conversations are pretty funny, so runs aren’t too serious,” he says. “We talk about more than just WoW. Politics comes up a lot.”

It’s an odd dynamic at first glance, because most massively multiplayer games don’t just allow friends to play together—they actually rely on the camaraderie. In WoW, many characters belong to a guild—a player-run organization within the game. Guilds can be formed around different goals, but they usually help members make friends with whom they can go adventuring. Magic spells and fighting monsters is fun, but it wouldn’t work without the help of others.



Tim Eisenbeisz plays World of Warcraft from his bedroom in Burnsville, Minn.

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Non-gamers are also giving WoW attention. Academics—including anthropologists, economists, and even epidemiologists—have shown interest in how it operates as both a community and a game. Something about WoW’s virtual world and how it mirrors reality tends to fascinate.

Randy Jordan knows this better than many. Jordan has co-hosted the last 140-some episodes of The Instance—a podcast dedicated to all things WoW. The Instance has long been among the top five on iTunes’ video game podcast chart, placing far above the official podcast produced by Blizzard Entertainment.

Jordan sees little use in bragging about this achievement, however. Instead, he notes the incredible amount of hours that go into producing all the other podcasts about the game—not

to mention the fan-made artwork, fiction writings, and other online material—as impressive. “You wouldn’t think that World of Warcraft podcasting is a very big niche, and it is,” says Jordan. “Whatever you can think of on TV or the Internet that encourages there to be a community of millions of people...there’s nothing like World of Warcraft for podcasting.”

Three years ago, about a year after The Instance launched, Alea Iacta Est (or AIE) was formed as an in-game guild so fans of the podcast could show their support and adventure together. While the average guild size is debatable (dedicated raiding guilds usually have about 60 people), AIE is the largest one in existence. According to Jordan, the guild has over 6,200 members.

Jordan credits AIE’s success to its members, whom he describes as being genuinely helpful and composing a terrific community. Though the guild is far too big to go into dungeons as a single group, guild-wide events are common, the most famous being AIE’s biannual craft fair. Weeks before fairs are held, members begin gathering in-game materials. When the event arrives, they gather to hand out enchantments and items to fellow guild members. “No guild can do what AIE does in one night in the craft fair,” says Jordan. “In fact, I would challenge any five guilds in the world to get together and do such a thing.”

These extra aspects of the game attract some players over the better-known WoW features, like killing monsters. Other appealing facets include collecting and selling in-game pets and cosmetic items to rack up as much gold as possible.

Of course, the majority of the game is still built around fighting monsters. Jordan, Eisenbeisz, and Wohlsdorf all participate in raids, where the game’s most dangerous monsters are found. Rewards for overcoming such challenges are significant, but even seasoned players can be caught off-guard by new fight mechanics. To a new player, these battles are utterly confusing. “It takes an incredible amount of coordination,” Jordan says. “That’s something I think people who don’t play WoW or video games like this at all can’t begin to grasp.”

Wohlsdorf describes differences between small dungeons and raids as being similar to differences between pick-up baseball games and the major league. The group’s success depends on each player’s skill and knowledge, and fast communication can be vital. In some fights, a single person can cause the whole group to die, costing everyone to repair their equipment and forcing them to spend time traveling back to the dungeon.

This type of experience is different from other competitive games in an important way. “If Blizzard is doing their job right, my raiding team has never won,” Jordan says. “It’s

Jesse and Breanna: A virtual romance taken offline

World of Warcraft had over 230 servers and 7 million participants on that magical night in November 2005. It was that night when the character of Jesse Hanssen and Breanna Miller first met. Both were night elf druids and Breanna was recruiting for her guild. Jesse joined, and over the course of the next six months the two talked extensively over Skype while playing. Even though they were both living in Brookings, S. Dak. at the time, Jesse could not convince Breanna to date in real life until May 19, 2006.

Soon after their first date, Jesse accepted a job in Eden Prairie, Minn., a four-hour drive from Breanna. The two spent almost every night talking on the phone or over Skype and playing World of Warcraft together. On September 19, 2007, Breanna drove to visit Jesse in Eden Prairie. He took her to the Japanese gardens, dropped down on one knee and proposed. After a few minutes of shocked silence—a rare occasion for their relationship—she screamed, “Yes!”

Jesse and Breanna were married December 13, 2008 in a wedding Jesse describes as “just perfect.” While their characters have not married on World of Warcraft, they still play together a couple nights a week. —Janae Olinger

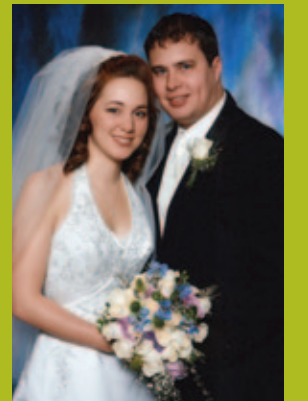


Photo by Steve Schatz from Leonard Studio

a game you can’t beat.” Unlike single-player games, WoW doesn’t have a definitive ending. If a group beats the most difficult boss in the game, there are still more magic items to be had. In some respect, “winning” in WoW is impossible for the same reason people can’t “win” at real life.

In a world driven by communities, Jordan, Eisenbeisz, and Wohlsdorf have found a space to fit in with WoW. For Jordan, he says he may not have met some of his closest friends had he not started playing. “A lot of people don’t understand such a thing as World of Warcraft and think it’s a fake world where you play a fake person who does fake things, and that when you turn it off it disappears and it doesn’t exist,” he says. “And that is the hardest misconception to tear down, because it is absolutely the opposite.”