

World of Warcraft: The Educational Tool

One of the most interesting topics in the educational circles today is the use of gaming and simulation techniques for instruction. For most, the first thought that comes to mind is that most of the games are mindless activities enjoyed by both children and adults, but have minimal educational value. This is in fact, not the case.

We have created a society of children and adults who are growing up in an environment where continued stimulation is the norm. Look at students who are in need of staying in touch through their cell phones, laptops, instant messaging, text messaging, and email. This stimulation and constant bombardment of communication plays a significant role in their learning. This is starting as early as elementary school, and is evident in middle schools and high schools. Traditional methods of teaching this new generation of children and young adults are going to have minimal effect on their learning if not augmented by the use of and inclusion of various other stimulations that can keep them engaged. Enter the online gaming industry.

What does the gaming industry bring to the table? Mainly, it brings excitement and engagement. So, if you can engage a child and maintain their attention, why not take the opportunity to also teach them? Sounds like a win-win situation for everyone. First off, you need to decide what the child needs to learn, and match those learning requirements to the game. For me, I have a 9-year old son that could benefit educationally and personally from many different games, but the one I have chosen is World of Warcraft.

World of Warcraft (WoW) is an MMORPG (Massive Multi-player Online Role Playing Game). I am embarrassed to say that the first I ever heard of World of Warcraft was on a South Park episode. I didn't really think it was a real game until I saw it at Best Buy, and remembered that I had seen one of my co-workers playing it at his house, but I didn't know what it was at the time.

According to Blizzard Entertainment's website, World of Warcraft is "...an online role-playing experience set in the award-winning Warcraft universe. Players assume the roles of Warcraft heroes as they explore, adventure, and quest across a vast world. World of Warcraft is a "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game" which allows thousands of players to interact within the same world. Whether adventuring together or fighting against each other in epic battles, players will form friendships, forge alliances, and compete with enemies for power and glory." Players gain experience through their play which allows them to move from the first level (Level 1) all the way to Level 70. The game is about the evolution of your skills and strategies, and is not based on your ability to quickly push buttons or triggers and master a game controller to be successful. Dealing with the carpal-tunnel issues related to those games is outside the scope of this article

What I like about the game first off is that although you kill monsters, spiders, bears, beasts, and "humanoids"; you don't kill people. That puts the game already ahead of most of the arcade games with any sort of battling or action that our kids (especially boys) are

interested in. The setting does contain battles, and you can die (thankfully, you can be healed and resurrected), but I wouldn't characterize the game as having excessive violence. For those players that want to battle other players, there is a Player versus Player (PvP) mode and special "battlegrounds". But, for the most part, players remain in the main area and complete quests.

As far as my son goes, he has a bad tendency (that I am sure comes from his mother) which is that he wants instant gratification, and has trouble with any long term commitment towards reaching a goal. I think our society breeds this tendency by everything being "accelerated". We buy fast food, drive-thru for prescriptions, get lube jobs in a jiffy, and can buy things quickly through the internet. Waiting for anything seems to be a characteristic of us all that is steadily fading away. Therefore, our levels of frustration grow higher now when we have to wait for things when so many other things can be achieved so quickly. In the higher-education world, we see it with accelerated degrees and mini semesters. High school kids are earning college credit in high school now from community colleges, all in the name of getting through school faster. But, faster shouldn't compromise the quality and the investment. A 5-week accelerated course should take the same amount of effort as a traditional semester-long course, and produce the same results. WoW is showing my son that he can set his sites on a goal, and working at it a little bit at a time will eventually yield significant results. He is learning that focusing on something for 6 months is doable, and you will be proud of your achievement. With WoW, your progress is measured by your level, which is easy for kids to understand. Since the required experience points (XP's in the game) increase for each level, achieving each level takes more time. As of the writing on this, my son's character is Level 27, with his eye set on Level 30. He has been at this for six months now.

So, just what are the educational contributions of World of Warcraft? Actually, there are several. However, you should look at those specific items that your children need to work on in order to determine if the game is a good venue for providing that education. Here is a synopsis of what you could use to assist in shaping your child's education and life experiences:

- For those with children who show signs of impatience or ADD, a slow steady schedule that mixes fun with diligence will demonstrate that, over time, small amounts of effort can yield significant results. Measurement of these results is demonstrated through the increasing levels of achievement. As a parent, I would work out a "plan" with your child to help them match their actual levels against their plan. Of course, you need to watch the play time each week (more about that later).
- As a player's character increases in level, they get trained by a trainer to gain new and improved skills. Of course, you have to pay for the training, much like you have to pay for college and continuing education. It is a good lesson for kids that you save for training, and you keep training as you continue through your life. You can use this analogy to help them understand their need for continued lifelong learning.

- For many of the quests, teamwork is required. Children and young adults can learn how to leverage each others' strengths on a team to complete quests that cannot be completed alone. With more than one computer in the house, you could play along at the same pace as your child and be one of their party members. Teaching children to work together for a common goal is important. As they grow up, collaboration and teaming with others will be a necessary skill.
- Since the game is based on completing quests, strategy and organized thinking is critical. Parents can help kids by working with them on how to strategize their quest completion. While many of the quests are difficult, don't despair. There are web sites like www.allakhazam.com that provide helpful information, strategies, and forums on how to successfully complete the quests.
- WoW has a great built-in economy. The game allows players to collect gold, silver, and copper coins from completing quests or defeating non-player opponents. Beasts and opponents that you kill drop items that you place in your backpack. Occasionally, you need to empty your backpack, or store some of your items in a bank. Players can trade items with each other, mail each other items or money, and can buy and sell goods at auction houses. The lesson here is asset management, saving, and planning purchases. You can also provide rewards for your child for saving so much of their acquired wealth.
- Players can choose up to two trades, such as herbalist, alchemist (yes, my son knows what that is now – do you?), leather worker, engineering, miner, and several others. These trades give them the ability to make items and sell them to other players. Learning about the importance of different trades and their contribution to an economy is something many children could benefit from.

In World of Warcraft, one must start at level 1 and can go as far as level 70. This is no easy feat, and players gain new capabilities and options as they move to higher levels. Although my son is enthralled by the cool armor he has and the spells he can cast, he is just now grasping that his progression from a level 1 to a level 27 took six months. "Has it been 6 months already?" he asks. I remember his last Spring Break, and he was a level 25. His goal was to get to level 30 so he could give his player a new skill. We worked out that if he completed a half level per day, he would be at level 30 when Spring Break was over. During Spring Break I encouraged him to follow "the plan". He followed it as best he could, and was ecstatic about his progress, even though he only made it to level 28. Although he sees level 60 or 70 a million miles away, he is starting to show signs of understanding that anything is achievable if you work at it. He is slowly learning the value of having a plan and sticking with it over a period of time, and the rewards will come. And, even if you miss your plan, you can still make a new one.

Interestingly enough, one thing I noticed when he started playing was that he was not so nice to some of the other players. His limited typing (excuse me, I forgot it is called "keyboarding" now) skills had him typing in chat to other players that could be construed as rude. With the amount of instant messaging, email, and text messaging going on today, learning some etiquette in communicating electronically through text is a must for kids. I work with him to learn a little bit more about online communication and how to do it in the most effective manner.

It may not be all fun and games with WoW, however. As a parent, you will need to monitor or control your child's time on the game. WoW has built in parental controls to allow parents to restrict the times in which their children can play. I have found this very useful, and necessary. Also, you need to ensure that your child knows what information about themselves they can and cannot give to other players. This is huge, parents. Your child needs to remain anonymous online, and they need to be instructed regularly about not giving out their name, address, or any other identifying information.

Overall, I have been happy with the game's results on my son's growth. I have been afraid of his tendencies to not stay with something very long, and get frustrated and quit. He has stuck with this game for 6 months, which is a great feat on his part. Additionally, he has fun doing it. Now, when we talk about achieving other goals, I use WoW as a point of reference for him, reminding him that he has achieved his goals even though they took a long time to complete. For him, 6 days is a lifetime, much less 6 months. He has joined "parties" and worked with others to complete quests, and has even learned an X,Y coordinate system without realizing it. He is learning the value of earning, saving, and trading with others, without having to learn the lesson with real money. All in all, I think it has helped him in many ways, and has been worth the investment.

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