

The Iron Cage of Play

A Weberian Approach to Understanding the Virtual Economy of World of Warcraft

ABSTRACT: Traditionally, Weber's theory of rationalism is utilized to analyze historical processes in society, such as bureaucracy, economy and religion (Ritzer). However, no author to date has extended Weber's theory of rationalization to virtual economies. I will show how Weber's theory of rationalism is a useful sociological framework to understand that the actions and beliefs of the two different types of players in WoW are tied to their offline economic values. I propose to analyze massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG), specifically World of Warcraft (WoW), in the context of modern capitalism. By examining the gaming ethics and behaviors of players in WoW, I argue that players bring their offline economic rationale into the game. Beliefs about what constitute work and acceptable economic behavior in an offline world are carried into the online gaming world. As a result, we can see two types of opposing real-world behaviors that are rooted in an offline capitalistic tradition transferred into the game world: individual hard work and a capitalistic rationale of efficiency.

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Max Weber's sociological writings identify how a society's religious conceptions of the world implicitly or explicitly shape non-secular domains. He showed how the Protestant concept of "the calling" to God is fulfilled through a calling to inner-worldly labor (Weber [1930]). The concept of performing secular labor as a calling from God infused capitalism with an economic zeitgeist of religious overtones, which resulted in modern capitalism. Although the religious calling to labor is diffused and nearly unrecognizable 200 years later, I believe there are other social domains that are imbued with the inner-worldly spirit of capitalism that Weber identified. The spirit of endless accumulation for no other goal than the pursuit of wealth, and a work ethic that promotes intense dedication to labor shape behaviors in non-economic spheres of life. One of those spheres is play; specifically, online game playing.

I propose to analyze massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG), specifically World of Warcraft (WoW), in the context of modern capitalism. By examining the gaming ethics and behaviors of players in WoW, I argue that players bring their offline economic rationale into the game. Beliefs about what constitute work and acceptable economic behavior in an offline world are carried into the online gaming world. As a result, we can see two types of opposing real-world behaviors that are rooted in an offline capitalistic tradition transferred into the game world: individual hard work and a capitalistic rationale of efficiency.

Until recently, the discourse of game analysis has been dominated by theories that treated games as an escape from the real world. Current discourse focuses on an online-to-offline model, in which online games are treated a source for developing skills that are eventually transferred to an offline work or education setting (Ito, Seely).¹ Even the military follows this model; they see online games as a useful training tool for soldiers in the battlefield (Curtis). But the offline-to-online model is overlooked in the analysis of

¹ Joi Ito and John Seely Brown have written extensively on how WoW can provide great training for team management and group work

MMORPGs; that is, the tendencies for players to bring out-of game offline behaviors into in-game online settings.

An offline-to-online perspective opens up new dimensions of sociological play analyses situated in non-play domains. Instead of seeing players as purely escaping the offline world, we can see them as negotiating their offline values in an online world. Instead of romanticizing online games as a utopia free of real world concerns, we should recognize how offline social stratifications are reproduced online. Most importantly, this perspective gives a more fluid presentation of offline and online worlds. In this case I will argue that the flow of ideas and behaviors originate from an offline rationale. Specifically, I will look at how gaming ethics and subversion are rooted in a modern capitalistic rationale within the virtual economy of World of Warcraft (WoW).

In analyzing WoW, we will see that even a game that is supposed to provide entertainment cannot escape the internal logic of rational capitalism as identified by Weber. Traditionally, Weber's theory of rationalism² is utilized to analyze historical processes in society, such as bureaucracy, economy and religion (Ritzer).³ However, no author to date has extended Weber's theory of rationalization to virtual economies. I will show how Weber's theory of rationalism is a useful sociological framework to understand that the actions and beliefs of the two different types of players in WoW are tied to their offline economic values. This follows in the Weberian tradition of understanding that how we conceive the world orients our action in the world. As a tenacious fan of Weber, I propose that we extend this tradition to the world-wide-web: how we conceive the material world orients our action in the virtual world. Before I proceed, I will provide a synopsis of the social landscape of World of Warcraft and situate gaming in the transhistorical lineage of playing.

² Weber has several definitions of "rationalism," in which I will address in the latter part of the paper.

³ This citing was originally found in K. Peter Takayama's "Rationalization of state and society: A Weberian view of early Japan." *Sociology of Religion*, 1998

Background on World of Warcraft

Owned by Blizzard, a US based company, WoW is the most popular MMORPG, in which massive numbers of players around the world play online through a character to advance through game levels.⁴ WoW, like other MMORPGs, contains its own virtual currency and economy in the form of goldpoints; purchasable commodities range from points and virtual real estate to magical objects and clothing. WoW is modeled like a real world in that players have to satisfy basic needs. These needs are met in the form of goldpoints, which are rewards received for beating monsters; goldpoints are equivalent to energy for survival.⁵ The highest levels require collaborative playing in the form of guilds, where anywhere from five to a few hundred players coordinate to play at the same time.⁶

However, there are players who illegally subvert the system by purchasing gold points and high-level avatars that were earned by another person. Therefore, there are two ways to “level up” WoW: players can either level up with their own skill and time, or a player can pay for the leveling up work to be done by another person. The latter, which is critical to understanding how a spontaneous virtual economy emerges, occurs through transactions that involve an exchange of real monetary capital. Players who do this are illegally buying goldpoints and avatars with real money.

Masquerading online through a purchased avatar is highly looked down upon. In a question and answer exchange from *Wired Magazine* below, a player inquires about bypassing a few hundred playing hours by purchasing a virtual mage or knight on eBay that is already leveled up.

⁴ WoW’s 7.5 million players are distributed throughout the world. Players pay an average of \$20 a month and are predominantly located in Western Europe and Northern America (WoW). Players can play together from any geographic location with a high-speed Internet connection, electricity, and a fast computer. Thus, this game is virtual in that players never have to meet physically to play together. Contrary to stereotypes that online gamers are teenage boys, the most recent studies have shown that the average of players is 28 years old and 30% of players are women. (Yee).

⁵ Recently, Blizzard started incorporating parallel real world events for the online world. For example, for the 2006 Christmas holiday, they created a Christmas-themed quest. This is an example of how a parallel real world event can be introduced into the online world (WoW).

⁶ Some levels require months of playing hours or hours of uninterrupted playing.

Reader: *I'm sick of having a weak-ass World of Warcraft character. Can I just buy a high-level avatar on eBay?*

Answer: *Sure you can. On eBay, \$300 will buy you a hot, female, level-60 warrior with Cloudkeeper legplates and a Hammer of the Northern Wind. IGE, the Wal-Mart of online worlds, will transform you into a demigod with the swipe of a credit card. But when you show up online, prepare to be shunned. "You will look like a jerk," says Joi Ito, the venture capitalist who runs a World of Warcraft guild. Seasoned players can tell when someone clad in unearned raiment. Those who spend months slogging up to level 60 learn the Elizabethan protocols that govern Warcraftian society--loot divvying, cryptic jargon, secret handshakes. You will have no clue, and they'll pick up on it immediately. "It takes a lot of practice, thinking, and time to learn how to play a character," Ito says...Everyone enters World of Warcraft equally weak, and only through toil do heroes emerge. A store-bought identity makes you no better than a trust-fund brat: powerful by dint of your wallet, not your mad skillz. Money can buy you everything but cred (Thompson pp. 42).*

What may seem a minor purchase of a few hundred dollars has turned into a massive, player-driven economy of more than one billion dollars, with a global labor force producing high-level WoW characters for thousands of players around Europe and America (Castronova pp.13, Jin). This labor force is predominantly located in South East Asia, India and China, which has the highest concentrations of players – estimated at a half million workers (Jin). The workers in China are called goldfarmers, because they sit at the computer, killing monsters for virtual goldpoints. Goldfarmers are organized in large work groups of 80 players and are employed by a single owner, who decides the pay scale and supplies the resources for producing the points.⁷ Jin sees this organized form of labor as gaming sweatshops, where the labor takes place in low-income countries and usually exploitative conditions.

All together, the virtual WoW economy is estimated at billions of dollars traded against real world currency (Castronova pp. 13). Although a global labor production structure and massive online gaming populations are not new forms of interaction, it is the combination of these sectors that gives rise to the peculiar economy of virtual worlds, one that rests on global labor and players who are obsessed with advancing levels. How can the interaction of these two seemingly separate spheres be explained? One upholds a Protestant work ethic

⁷ blankets, food, shelter, computer and internet connection

of individual toil and the other upholds a market-based efficiency rationale. Although these two views seem contradictory, they make up the modern capitalistic values of hard work and monetary rationalism.

Transhistorical playing and capitalism

Since the emergence of online games in 1980's, boundaries of the online and offline are continuously being blurred. But for the first time, we are witnessing a massive underground virtual economy develop that is very much rooted in offline behavior. It is a virtual economy that combines the obsession with winning in a recreational game-play with offline capitalistic rationale. Both capitalism and play are transhistorical. But if we examine how Weber defined modern capitalism as a historically specific development, then we can also trace online gaming as a historically specific form in the historical lineage of play.

Weber identified a new face of capitalism that differentiated it from all other forms of capitalism that had existed previously (XXXI, 17). In the *Protestant Ethic*, he said capitalism without the "Western ethos" has always existed, but in the 19th century it took a new form, a rationalistic outlook that was rooted in the Protestant ethic (Weber [1930] pp. 21). This historically specific combination of "the calling" and capitalism produced more robust capitalists that succeeded in accumulating wealth for investment.

Play is also a transhistorical activity (Hendricks pp 23)⁸. Playing games has always existed, but we are witnessing a historically specific development in play, one that combines recreationalism and modern capitalism. For the first time, the two are being combined in ways that have never been seen or could have been possible before.

Hendricks defines play as a voluntary activity of entering a space with its own rules, and this has been present in all cultures at all times (181). MMORPGS are much like traditional board games, like monopoly, or leisure sports, like soccer. As society changes, so do the forms of play. For example, the rise of computer games coincides with developments

⁸ Hendricks is citing J. Huizinga's [Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture](#).

in technology. However, playing games has now incorporated the logic of capitalistic rationale that is found in the offline world. A player in America, as seen in Thompson's article from above, can go to eBay to purchase the goldfarmer's labor in the form of goldpoints and high-level avatars. In an online world, where it is not about the physicality of one's body, it is easier to deceive other players.

Deception that is financially motivated has always existed in games. There is a history of professional sports or players and their viewers/fans using money to gamble or illegally purchase performance-enhancing drugs. It can also be argued that professional sports are capitalistic, therefore gaming and capitalism as a combination are not new. But WoW is a recreational game. Gamers are voluntarily entering the game as a form of leisure, not as a profession.⁹ As a leisurely game, WoW players have created a spontaneous, underground, player-driven, global, demanding, high-level avatars. This results in WoW goldfarmers who play the game as a profession to supply goldpoints to those who play for leisure.

Buying goldpoints from goldfarmers is not only illegal in WoW, it is also highly looked down upon. Thompson's response to the inquiring WoW player is that he needs to advance levels with his own skill and labor, not someone else's labor. Therefore, counterbalancing players who illegally subvert the game, are players who adamantly believe in advancing levels through individual skill. But players soon discover that there is always a new level to advance or a new world to conquer.

The success behind WoW is that Blizzard (WoW's parent company) consistently releases new worlds, so that there is never an end level to the game. In *Science as a Vocation*, Weber asks why "one engage[s] in doing something that in reality never comes, and never can come, to an end" (Weber [1946] pp. 138). The same can be asked of playing games. The reality of winning is never fully achieved in WoW.¹⁰ Just like science, the more you learn or win does not necessarily equate to conquering the ultimate level or to finding out

⁹ Almost all players work day jobs and play WoW after work as a form of leisure.

¹⁰Because Blizzard develops software that offers new levels to advance every few months.

the ultimate answer. For Weber, the closest answer he gives for intellectual devotion in a “godless world” is integrity. If one dedicates their life or time to something other than themselves, whether it be studying the “anatomy of a louse” or excelling in a game such as WoW, integrity should be the ultimate value (Weber [1946] pp. 135, 142). Players who uphold a gaming ethic that relies on one’s skill and eschews the practice of purchasing goldpoints with non-virtual money would agree with Weber. Yet players who subvert this code stand in opposition to this code of integrity. Both types of players bring their offline rationale into this online world.

Rationalism as present in WoW

Weber’s theory of rationalization sheds light on how players in WoW apply offline capitalistic rationale to the game. On a structural level, it takes shape in impersonal bureaucratization (Weber [1946] pp. 196). On a micro level, it affects the way people make decisions based on pure calculation of predictability and control, rather than communal needs (Weber [1946] pp. 229). The end goal is to “systematically organiz[e] all social relations so as to make them the most efficient possible means to maximizing wealth and/or power” (Bellah pp. 233). Weber develops his theory of rationalism as the mediation *par excellence* of all social actions. An extension of his theory to the social actions of players in WoW still holds. Players in WoW rationalize a market decision to speed up the leveling up process. They believe they can increase their online or virtual reputation by paying someone to handle the repetitive tasks of killing a monster in exchange for a monetary transaction. But we have to remember that this is a game and that playing the game as it is designed to be played does not result in direct capital, as does playing the stock market or rationalizing decision in any capitalistic settings of work. Players are bringing in their offline capitalistic rational for any means possible to an end, and are monetizing even playing itself. Weber identifies the power of money as the

"most abstract and impersonal element that exists in human life. the more the world

of the modern capitalist economy follows its own immanent laws, the less accessible it is to any imaginable relationship with a religious ethic of brotherliness. (Weber [1946], pp. 331).

Weber sees the “religious ethic of brotherliness” as the most rationalized leftovers of religion that directly challenge the values of modern capitalism (Weber [1946], pp. 327-330). We can see the tensions of this challenge in WoW. Those who rationalize the purchase of goldpoints constantly challenge an ethic of brotherliness found in WoW guilds. Guilds exhibit an online form of "brotherliness" teamwork, where players develop in-game camaraderie that develop into friendships and complex social networks. Players who buy goldpoints subvert the guild process. Therefore, players who monetize the game, spoil the rules of WoW, which are based on relationships of players with similar skill level coming together into guilds.

A more in-depth analysis of the rationalization process of players who subvert the game reveals that how they see the game is rooted in purely economically motivated behavior. Examined against the ideal type of economic action that Weber outlines, we can see that subversive players approach WoW as if *they and the game* were purely an economic, not recreational, interaction (Weber [1930], pp. 33). This is an example of what Weber predicts: rational approaches result in irrational outcomes (Weber [1946], pp. 33). A rational approach to WoW produces an irrational outcome of treating the gamescape as a new market to conquer. Herein lies Weber’s critical insight into the intimate relationship of play and money, that in “the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give[s] it the character of sport[s]” (Weber [1930] pp. 124, [1946] pp. 331). Clearly suggesting an implicit linkage between capitalism and sports (a category of play), Weber set the stage for an economic approach to the sociology of play.

Conclusion

Modern forms of play that occur in online virtual worlds have difficulty in maintaining pure isolation from the offline world. Players bring their offline behaviors, whether the “ethic of brotherliness” displayed in massive teamwork for a common goal, or the capitalistic rationale seen in the purchase of gaming points and avatars on eBay. We can see how virtual worlds and economies reflect real world tensions: cooperation or individualism, working your way up or buying your way up. In *Economy and Society*, Weber explains that an economic sociological approach, as opposed to economic theory or history,¹¹ allows us to look into patterns of consistent economic behavior.¹² This approach brings to the forefront how patterns of behavior can be consistent across different mediums; in this case, offline-to-online.

In a world that is increasingly mediated online, WoW provides a window to understand how online behavior is embedded in offline behavior. In recognizing that online behavior affects markets and corporate and government policy across the world, we need to see that the old divisions of law, economics, social science and internet programmers may not be effective in creating principles of protocols or predicting unexpected consequences of virtual economies.¹³ In this analysis, it is apparent even a game cannot evade the principles of modern capitalism’s rationale.

Weber sees the development of rationalization as a way of life coinciding with the development of disenchantment as a mind-set of modernity (Weber [1946], pp. 155)¹⁴. If we are becoming more disenchanted as rationalization increases, than I believe playing games

¹¹ Economic history focuses on individual events or a specific economic event, Economic theory focuses on the single economic phenomenon in a vacuum on an abstract level.

¹² Weber’s citation originally found in Swedberg, Richard. Max Weber as an Economist and as a Sociologist: Towards a Fuller Understanding of Weber’s View of Economics. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol 58, no. 4. (Oct., 1999), pg 561-582.

¹³ Hypothetically, a sudden flood of virtual gold can cause hyperinflation in WoW, which could then potentially affect real world currencies. Goldfarming sweatshops are a new form of labor concern. China is now attempting to prevent the supply of underground points and avatars by creating gaming laws and registration programs. Online auctions sites, such as eBay and yahoo, have agreed to ban the sale of all virtual gaming items from WoW.

¹⁴ As disenchantment limited the scope of religion, rationalization became more pervasive in all parts of life

is an attempt to become *re-enchanted* with the world. Yet, even in the attempt to re-enchanting ourselves in a mystical game world, we can see the irrational tensions of this new virtual reality. WoW's tagline is, "It's Not a Game, It's a World." Perhaps Weber would have named it, "It's Not a Game, It's an Iron Cage."



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