Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

Iprofess, Zuljin, World of Warcraft

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Recommended Citation
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R.V. Kelly 2’s Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

Review by IProfess, Elvin Druid of Zuljin, Azeroth

All communications care of <barlowj@pacificu.edu>  
(Please place “For Iprofess” in subject line)

Kelly 2, R. V. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.  

Editor’s Forward: This review is another anonymous contribution purporting to be written by “Iprofess,” who presents himself as a cartoon character—which he now rather grandly describes as an “Avatar”—living in the cybernetic confines of an online game, The World of Warcraft. Mr. IProfess’ first contribution “The Tales of Azeroth”, can be found at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/03/iprofess.php and his second, a book review, Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2006/01/castronova.php. While we have pressed him for more original essays, he prefers now to confine his possibly certifiable thoughts to reviewing occasional books.

IProfess begins:  
Ah, gentle readers, it has now been more than a year since last I shared with you my rich experience as a resident of Zuljin, a most excellent server in the World of Warcraft. At that time I was lured into the shadow world that you inhabit to review Edward Castronova's work, Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games. [1] I have insisted to your otherwise excellent editor of this journal, in response to his constant importuning to write more, that I was simply not interested. What can usefully be said, has been said, or so I thought. Like all well-adjusted Avatars, I prefer to play.

My withdrawal was somewhat enforced by an unforeseen event in the World of Warcraft: an expansion was added, just as I reached the apogee
of the sixty possible levels in the original. And this required that I began again, questing and bashing monsters in The Outlands, where I can fly! I can fly!

Well, as you can see, The Outlands are quite an exciting alternative to the so-called The Real World (TRW) where eyeballs are sold to TV advertisers who extract them from their audiences by luring them to observe passively completely non-interactive games, such as the sad decline of Brittany, who began dancing before gnomes and dwarves for silver pieces in Ironforge in Azeroth, and now dances for far less in TRW.

But I digress--a continual problem in TRW where the self-imposed disciplines of leveling are both vague and elusive and their rewards seldom of epic quality! I return to TRW to write this review essay not about a new book, but by the standards of gaming, a very old one, the 2004 volume, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.

This book was written by a highly qualified author, the amusingly named R.V. Kelly 2 (I assume that the neo-classical RTD [2] Kelly was probably taken on his server.) At the time of publication, this was an excellent introduction to MMORPG, or, as his title would rather have it, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.

Kelly 2 worked in virtual reality application development for the Digital Equipment Corporation, a leader in TRW industries, which briefly dominated the field. I thought it would be amusing, and possibly even instructive — though I realize this latter process is not one of much interest to denizens of TRW who prefer to be endlessly diverted from their cruel lives — to use this book as a sort of touchstone for where MMORPGs have gone since the work's publication in 2004.

Upon reading and reflection, this work proved to be a worthy choice because it has stood the test of time, at least in TRW where time stomps by like a lagging Dying Clefthoof. Because Kelly 2 tried to make useful analytical points from the games of the time, many of his observations
proved not to be time-bound at all. It is evident that he was a close observer of the industry as it developed, and most of his points remain true today.

One of Kelly's concerns is the issue of addiction in MMORPG. This, of course, presents some odd logical issues for me: am I, for example, addicted to myself? However, this issue is indeed still a timely one.

At present, the homeland of this estimable journal in TRW is engaged in the quadrennial "Quest for the Presidency of the United States" — no winners there, only several hundred million losers.

But it seems safe to hazard that a question in that election, issuing no doubt from such saintly lips as those of candidates Romney or Huckabee (!), both eager to become Master of the Reagan Guild, will be questions as to whether not to impose increased regulations on game playing, lest even more eyeballs be lost to advertisers.

So the question of addiction has not changed. Kelly 2, however, brings a sharp eye and much thoughtful time spent in MMPORGs to the issue. His entire Chapter 4, "Attraction and Addiction" is devoted to the issue. He wisely deals first with attraction and finds that in many cases the games make up for deficits the play experiences in TRW, including perhaps poor social skills, less than attractive RW bodies, an inability to succeed in reaching goals, etc. MMORPG provide a second chance, in effect, a place to excel, where disabilities are potentially balanced by the development of new skills, in new virtual identities.

For other players, the MMORPG are tension releasers, entertainment more enveloping than television, new and beautiful lands to explore, a new dimension in which to do art, even a place to find a new sort of spiritual satisfaction in being kind, generous and thoughtful with other players.

Some, however, are so attracted that they can properly be described as addicted. Kelly 2 believes that this is true of 9 to 30% of the populations
of games in which he has played. His definition is very loose—these players are in the games "all the time..." (p. 66). Kelly 2 unabashedly presents this addiction as physically similar to drug addiction, and likely genetic in its origins.

While I am hardly an expert in this field, this is a position which is highly controversial in the literature, and, in my view, probably not ultimately defensible. In this regard at least, the field has advanced since the publication of this book and if the discussions are no less decisive, they are now conducted with much more information and from a much wider perspective.

An area where Kelly 2 brings his innate thoughtfulness plus considerable experience in games to bear is in delineating some of the higher-level satisfactions experienced by players he meets online. Many felt that they were creating a story both as participant and author. Others enjoyed communities which seemed as real and as useful to them as RW groups of friends.

Kelly 2's questioning in games must make him seem a very strange sort of player to many other Avatars. He is seemingly always playing with one hand on the mouse and the other on a pen, taking notes. While this participant-observation technique is certainly common among RW academics, Kelly 2's approach is more impressionistic than systematic.

This aspect of game research, too, has changed. We now have many more statistical studies done with much wider databases than Kelly 2 can provide alone. [3] But nonetheless, Kelly 2's insights are often quite startling to a calloused Avatar like myself who has come to expect very little from a denizen of TRW who merely dips in and out of virtual reality.

Kelly 2 devised many thoughtful experiments to test virtual world reactions to some of the questions he wished to explore. For example, he gave away valuable items to players, including large amounts of game wealth. He then asked that they be returned in exchange for even greater
gifts. Few people thanked him, and none returned the first gift, although some were very grateful. (Pp. 39-40) This makes an Avatar ashamed of his people, and one wishes that Kelly 2 had been more specific so that warning signs could be posted on the outskirts of this server, whichever one it was!

Kelly 2, following on the heels of Edward Castranova's excellent work, which I reviewed in these pages, also discusses gaming economy, which he finds dreadfully Darwinian, stating: "Greed is Creed."

Ultimately, Kelly 2 comes down firmly on the side of gaming worlds as escapist, and states that "...the essential element that defines all MMORPG cultures (is)-the ability of players to experience the joys and triumphs of life without the physical risks and punishing failures." (44)

This is, I hope, largely the experience of a non-gamer, one who has approached the MMORPG culture more as an anthropologist than as a true participant. At the same time, the book seems to take a contrary view to this doleful assessment at many points as Kelly 2 chronicles the satisfactions experienced by others and the many examples of altruism.

I myself have recently been speaking with soldiers playing in The Outlands of WoW from TRW's outlands, Iraq. These men, while clearly trying to distract themselves from an exceedingly harsh reality, also seem to me to be approaching the virtual world as altruists, whereas one would expect them to be savagely virtual-self centered. I do hope that somebody as sensitive as Kelly 2 seems to be to virtual worlds does some work in this unique environment.

One of Kelly 2's chapters is "Sampling the Games." Among other examples, Kelly 2 uses games such as, Asheron's Call [4], City of Heroes, A Tale in the Desert, Darkfall, Toontown, The Saga of Ryzom, Lost Continents, Priest, Dragon Empires, Neocron, Dark Age of Camelot, Anarchy Online, Project Entropia, Star Wars Galaxies, Middle Earth Online, and, of course, Everquest. He also mentions but does not go into any detail on several others, including World of Warcraft, whose
future success was unforeseeable as he finished writing this work, probably in 2003.

The history and economies of MMORPG are illustrated in the list that Kelly 2 chose: Five years after Kelly 2 published, *Ultima Online, City of Heroes, Lineage, The Saga of Ryzom, Neocron, Dark Age of Camelot, Anarchy Online, Project Entropia, Star Wars Galaxies, and Everquest* are all going strong and into subsequent versions and expansion packs.

Gone but not forgotten, still represented on the passage between TRW and Cyber worlds, the Internet, are: *Earth & Beyond,* and several other of the games which attracted a lasting fan base in their brief lives in TRW. *Darkfall* is apparently still under development five years later, but a loyal crew still works to bring it out. *Toontown,* despite being an attempt of the Disney Studios to cash in on MMORPGs while following the "play nice" rules of TRW, seems to be moribund. *Lost Continents* seems never to have gotten off TRW ground. *Priest* never really made it out of its home in TRW, Korea. *Dragon Empires* died in 2005.

The failure of some of Kelly 2's game choices to survive somewhat dates his book, but his chapter was really written to permit him to make useful observations about games in general as much as to simply list possible choices for the reader. It would be nice, however, if the publisher were to update this list, or Kelly 2 would update it on the Internet. Sadly, this book seemed to have died an undeserved death in TRW.

And for each game on the list Kelly 2 put forward, there are at least five or six which have developed and proven successful since 2004. [5]

Kelly 2's last chapters, "Making a MMORPG" and "The Future of MMORPGs" are useful to straight citizens of the shadow world — TRW—and to Avatars alike. Because of, no doubt, his own technical background, he goes into quite a bit of detail that has, I must say, given me an entirely new appreciation for myself and for my worlds. His "Future" chapter seems to me to be rather weak, the technology of the games has not changed as quickly as he has expected, perhaps because
the industry has largely been taken over by my money men from TRW and
the artists and Avatars have been driven back from a frontier where
start-up costs now are in the many millions of dollars.

All in all I have found Kelly 2's little book a very worthwhile one, and
the exercise of comparing the world of the MMORPG in 2003 with the
one we know today a somewhat surprising one in that it seems to show
that the essential nature and questions of the environments have been
stabilized for some time. This is particularly odd in light of the continual
spate of breathless tomes that seek to explain these worlds to novice
audiences. Not that breathless now, and consumers not that novice,
either. World of Warcraft alone now has ten million subscribers.


[2] Editor's note: it is impossible to resist pointing out that, in fact, the
candidate to raise this issue was Hillary Clinton:

[3] See Nicholas Yee's The Daedlus Project at
http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/

[4] Which passed into the history of TRW in 2005; see the very touching
tribute by Clive Thompson at:
http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/commentary/games/2
005/12/69848. Clive, relax, it still plays very well, just not in TRW!

[5] See a typical hybrid fan/commercial site at:
http://www.mmorpg.com/index.cfm?BHCP=1&bhcp=1 for lists of
such new games.