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Protecting Human Children in the World of Warcraft

Posted on May 1, 2009 by Editor

By IProfess, Level 72 Night Elf Druid, Zul'jin, Azeroth

Editor’s Note: This piece is written by IProfess, self-proclaimed avatar from the on-line game World of Warcraft. With our commenting function, readers can now leave appropriate remarks following the piece. Please note, that as in every case in Interface, the author’s opinion are his, hers, or its own and do not represent those of Interface nor those of the Berglund Center at Pacific University Oregon.

IProfess begins:

Those who yet need an introduction to my particular circumstances— a ‘Toon from the World of Warcraft enabled by his own efforts to cross into what is laughably called “The Real World” (TRW) —could do no better than to read my previous works published in this inestimable journal. [1]

My submissions are usually intended to protect my own beloved Azeroth—the World of the “World of Warcraft.” Azeroth, being highly conditioned by a number of activities in TRW, is terribly vulnerable. A ‘Toon never knows when a politician will take it into his or her criminally ambitious head to start viewing even virtual worlds with alarm. After all, these debased beings have made very good livings for decades threatening, now this impending doom, now that one.

Occasionally, however, I find myself, while not agreeing with the pols, at least pausing to weigh the possible accuracy of their latest self-serving clamor. All of us, ‘Toon or TRW shadows, usually agree on one issue: It is almost universally held “good” to protect the young [2], whether it has a negative or a positive result. This piece is a plea for a special sort of such protection: it is very important that human parents play alongsiede their children in Azeroth. There are many reasons for doing this.

First, the positive ones: The World of Warcraft is, of course, my world, and I think it beautiful
beyond compare. But from TRW perspective it is also a vast social experiment, driven, as such
experiments often are, by commercial purposes. The driving force of Azeroth, the
Unprogrammed Programmer if you will, is a being. (Whether singular or plural depends on each
‘Toon’s cosmological views or religious commitment.) We will refer to it simply as “Ol’ Bliz.” In
TRW it manifests itself as Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., an international corporation which has
changed hands repeatedly as it was merged with larger such entities [3].

From our perspective, its identity and purposes hardly matter. It is what it is. But like all gods, it
presents us, its creations, with both opportunities and dangers. The opportunities are many. In
playing, we become part of a voluntary international community of at least twelve million beings in
TRW from all nations, all age groups, and all walks of life. There are even more ‘Toons as each
player often has many more than one avatar. How many of these, like myself are fully sentient
and cross over periodically into TRW is, again, unknowable.

But from the perspective of human parents in TRW [4] Azeroth presents an unparalleled
educational opportunity to shape their young’s values and to give them instruction under widely
varied circumstances in which the worst thing that can happen is that they die virtually, and
immediately rez (resurrect) again. Azeroth has many of the temptations that TRW offers: alcohol,
sexuality of a limited sort, the chance to be rude, profane, to steal, to lie, to cheat. It is no
wonder that so many criminal ‘Toons, upon being expelled into TRW, become Wall Street
bankers.

But Azeroth also has opportunities for the young to learn to read, to write, to type, to
communicate politely with peers and with elders. While many short forms drawn from texting and
Leet [5] are in common use, even these have their rules and correct and incorrect forms. The
game itself encourages players to excel in many aspects of the game, to create great beauty,
and to learn widely varied forms of humor. An avatar can experience virtual life as a male, as a
female, as a Gnome, as an Elf, a Dwarf, all the time learning about stereotypes and prejudices.
The game will reward the avatar for being kind to others, to animals, to the environment, as well
as for accepting group responsibility.

A character can be developed to make it useful in fulfilling specific group roles appropriate to its
own interests. All of these permit even a child to build a reputation and to join a guild, taking such
responsibility as he or she wishes. The game will also reward thrift and punish profligacy. Azeroth
offers an opportunity to manage a sizeable allowance in an environment where nothing harmful
can be purchased, little of value as it is viewed in TRW as wasted. And all of this occurs within an
inherently educational environment. Until one learns, one cannot accomplish one’s goals and
move forward in the game.

The avatar can explore vast digital realms, some ethereal in their beauty, others terrifying in their
menace, learning quickly to distinguish one from the other. And the avatar can also witness the
behaviors, highly positive and highly negative, of hundreds of other such avatars over a few hours
in Azeroth.
The young can, of course, learn these things on their own, and most are forced to do so. In TRW parents, try as they may, are painfully aware that their progeny will learn much of what they need from others, from harried teachers instructing huge classes, but usually, and often regrettably, from their peers. But Azeroth offers a parent a chance to co-pilot their child through digital temptations while sharing with the child what they themselves have learned. This opportunity often comes with great effort, expense, and even pain in TRW. Children can learn what they need to know to eventually navigate so-called Real Worlds as well as digital ones.

But if parents opt out and choose not to play with their children as early as the young begin to do so, they do not accomplish anything positive, but rather turn their children loose in a digital environment when many of the long-term consequences of such an immersion are still largely unknown—at least to humans. One lesson that the current population of Azeroth, believed to be perhaps twelve million, teaches us is that humans are going to play. Some believe it is in their very nature to play, perhaps a key aspect of being human.

While the average age of players in Azeroth is believed to be in the mid-thirties, there are plenty of younger players. Most servers become extremely crowded within thirty minutes of school letting out. Some of these children play astonishingly late, to the point where even the most enthusiastic ‘Toon has to wonder what, if anything, their parents are thinking.

And if the parent opts out and begins treating Azeroth as a cheap and engaging baby sitter, it will do that job. Children will happily spend hour upon hour on the computer while the parent watches television reruns to their own heart’s content or engages in other non-interactive activities which probably would not engage an intelligent child’s attention.

But to opt out is irresponsible. Azeroth offers as many dangers as it does opportunities. While I do not in any way intend to align myself, even temporarily or rhetorically, with those who demand increased regulation of Game Worlds such as Azeroth [6], (usually because their constituents are increasingly questioning their hapless attempts to regulate TRW), in truth I have observed behavior online which parents would do well to worry about. Azeroth, simply put, allows the young to mimic what passes for mature behavior in TRW, among other unsupervised young who gleefully reward such behavior, again, just as in TRW. One of these is to swear and curse in the chat line.

Communication in game is largely through text chat, though small groups may use Voice over Internet Protocol and transmit audio in real time. In text chat, a player types into a chat line, which is then read by the audience that the player selects. Players can voluntarily put on an adult language filter which will render incoming language a little less profane: all common curses become something like (*&^! But the highly motivated can evade such a simple filter by varying spacing or themselves inserting null characters producing something like “F # 5 K!” which will come through all such filters in its unaltered glory, even if strangely formatted.

Because this filter is voluntary, many adults will simply not enable it; this produces in one’s own
chat line what some may feel to be an emotionally satisfying string of expletives. Those few who do enable filtering will usually have little trouble in decoding others’ messages, cursing by its very nature being limited, repetitive, and predictable.

One can also drink without age limit in Azeroth. Buying or winning as loot in a struggle produces something like “Dwarven Stout,” which, when clicked on and consumed, produces in the chat line the inability to type accurately, and general messages in text like “Name seems to be sobering up.” Again, this is one of those “adult” behaviors unhappily imported from TRW. One consequence then, could be, say, a group of drunken digital gnomes with purple hair inviting each other to perform anatomically impossible and poorly understood acts, conveyed in badly misspelled text. And, of course, lying wildly about age, sexual experience, race and gender as they do so.

This is one of the few areas where Ol’ Bliz, could have an impact on the problem. This could be done simply by making the chat filter universal rather than opt-in. This would reduce the emotional satisfaction of seeing one’s own forbidden words in a chat line. Of course, this will eventually produce new swear words, such as %$#@!, but this problem can be dealt with when and if it arises!

If the young can swear and drink like mature ‘Toons in Azeroth, they can also dress like them. Admittedly proper dress is largely in the eye of the viewer. The issue is that in Azeroth, we may wear pretty much what we wish, or little or nothing. A click of the mouse will let any ‘Toon strip his or her own image down to its “birthday suit” not, fortunately, true nudity, but a costume of two brief pieces for females, trunks for males. All races are, with the possible exception of the gnomes [7], gendered, and even gnomes come in two types, though clearly they could grow up to become just about anything. So we can assume that female Trolls go for the huge feet of their own males [8] and that Tauren can discern the sexual identity of their own kind despite all the bling they wear. [9]

The problem lies, as is almost always the case, with two races, the Humans and the Elves. The genders of both Blood Elf and Night Elf races, and the Humans are highly sexualized and, depending on gear, sometimes markedly so. [10] They also dance. Each race has its own dance, and by general agreement among male ‘Toons, the female Night Elves are definitely the ones with whom to partner at the local inn.

Just as not all ‘Toons crossover into the real world, not all real world players will crossover into Azeroth in the sense of achieving a close identity with their avatar. But some do—the world is designed, after all, to achieve the highest possible degree of identification.

Another sort of closely related bad behaviors such as unrelentingly cruel violence (“griefing”), open racism, sexism, and other forms of highly prejudiced behavior are probably of less concern to most parents from TRW than cursing and sexual displays. But in the event that a human parent should wish to develop progeny with higher natures, there is much to worry about in Azeroth.
Ol' Bliz, for what may be crassly commercial reasons,[11] has designed Azeroth to be a brutally genocidal society. As a ‘Toon takes form, it must be committed from origins to either the Alliance or the Horde faction. The Alliance are, by the standards of TRW, the more heroic and romantic races, including my own Night Elves. The Horde is a chaotic coalition of various unlikely beings such as the Undead, Trolls, Orcs, and the Blood Elves.

The end result of the constant subtle and not so subtle encouragement of Ol' Bliz is that players, especially younger ones, take gleeiful pleasure in punishing “The Other” at every opportunity. Such contempt easily lends itself to situations wherein large groups of one side ruthlessly slaughter much smaller and weaker groups of the other, or groups set upon single players who have unwittingly wandered into the wrong area, all producing what in any other society would be labeled war crimes.

I do not mean to paint an unrelieved dark picture of Azeroth here. It is possible to totally avoid battle and to pass ethereal days discussing the ultimate nature of Elune, working on one’s Jewel crafting and waiting for the Darkmoon Faire to wend its way to town. There are a rich variety of pets to be collected for younger players, and everybody can work on accumulating fantastic costumes. But the underlying reality of Azeroth is Red War.

Like violence, the next category of bad behavior in Azeroth is very common in TRW. Dishonesty (“Ninja-ing”), and self-aggrandizement at the expense of Noobs (less experienced ‘Toons) are the stuff of daily life in capitalist societies, whether intended to accumulate Euros, Yen, Dollars or Azerothian gold, silver, or copper coins.

Unlike in TRW, in Azeroth the truly dishonest are rarely rewarded with television roles, federal bailouts or senatorial committee chairmanships. In Azeroth, one’s reputation is frangible and it is not good to become known as a ‘Toon who is likely to repeatedly “ninja” or steal loot from others. Once that happens, your appearance in the global chat window where everybody communicates is likely to be met with angry recounting of past crimes and dire warnings about engaging in groups or social activities with you.

Azeroth also tests the emotional stability of even the mature. The not infrequent battles for loot or reputation become quite important, and an extended-group quarrel in a Raid or a Battle Ground — areas set aside for organized encounters with players from the opposing faction — produces real adrenalin surges. It is not uncommon to see players totally lose self-control and SCREAM IN CAPS such as “I HATE ALL THE ALLIANCE F43S.”

Such behavior is justly condemned in all civilized societies and usually thought of as a form of temporary madness calling for intervention by one’s peers, unless, of course, there are uniforms involved. There is doubtless a self-correcting element to such ‘Toon rage in Azeroth as few computer keyboards will really stand up to repeated banging, but it should be discouraged from the beginning, ideally by a calmer parent sitting at the child’s side.
Sexual predation is one of the greatest fears of human parents whose children spend much time on line. Obviously even one case is far too many, but in fact there are very few documented cases of such things occurring in Azeroth. The environment, being intensely social, is itself unlikely to facilitate the sort of privacy that such degenerate beings need. However, just as in TRW, younger players should be taught not to reveal personal data. When in doubt one can invoke angelic beings—Game Managers, who represent Ol’ Bliz—and refer them to particular incidents that will surely be investigated. And Ol’ Bliz knows all, of course, keeping digital records of at least many hours of play. Players are frequently warned and can be banned for repeated infractions.

CONCLUSION:

On balance, the World of Warcraft is best thought of as an extended opportunity for good parenting. It offers the young, if properly instructed, a chance to model good behavior, observe thoughtful adult behavior and to ease into the company of more mature beings. A huge social space like Azeroth is a good place to teach children how to behave socially. Much of the ancient etiquette of TRW is even more appropriate in Azeroth. In general, the standards for good behavior are higher in Azeroth than in TRW, thankfully.

As unlikely as it may seem to the uninitiated, many families play together, extended families have formed mutually supportive guilds, and players of all ages have experienced rich rewards in doing so.

Endnotes:

[1] See; “The Tales of Azeroth” and “Toons and Terrorism” See too my books reviews, the first of R. V. Kelly 2’s Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, and Edward Castronova’s work, Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games, and most recently: Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, (editors,) Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader

[2] This piece is dedicated to my former guildies in “Heroic,” Zul’jin, Azeroth, who taught me many of the lessons I attempt to convey here. Ty guys…


[4] There will be some confusion in nomenclature here, because in Azeroth, one of our races, in addition to Draenel, Blood Elves, Night Elves, Dwarves, etc., is the Human one. We will capitalize Human when referring to the Azerothian race, giving it the dignity humans sadly lack in TRW.


[6] I refer of course, to a minority of the desperate-for-reelection political elite. If we are to judge by the recent career, for example, of the apparently deranged governor of Illinois, Rod
Blagojevich who wrote, early in his career: “Yet, every day, millions of young children spend their afternoons at the controls of video games like this one, simulating acts of murder, dismemberment, decapitation and sexual seduction.”

http://www.govtech.com/gt/articles/93170


Those who doubt that these particular images are representative might scroll through the other eighty-eight thousand images turned up in this particular search.

[11] I intend to submit a frankly theological exploration of the World of Warcraft for subsequent editions, perhaps after I have achieved level 80, at which point I hope to come face to face with the gods, and to ask them some penetrating questions.

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ONE THOUGHT ON “PROTECTING HUMAN CHILDREN IN THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT”

Editor
on May 1, 2009 at 3:39 PM said:

Poster Name: Anonymous
Message: I agree, it’s how I started with my son, only on EQ. Much was gained there for him: leadership, social skills, and even business writing. This article is the best yet, I would have had little to offer to improve it. I think however that iprofess has some unfinished business, and more to learn from the adults, and his guild partner(s). I know for a fact that there are others in Azeroth that could learn, and gain from a visit. Sincerely, A long time partner in game