How World of Warcraft has evolved with the Internet

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“Games are very rapidly solved these days,” says Ion Hazzikostas, the game director of *World of Warcraft*.

Hazzikostas, known to the *World of Warcraft* community as Watcher, has developed the 16-year-old massively multiplayer online role-playing game since 2008. On a call with WIRED, he reminisced about how, early in the history of games, before raid walk-through videos, data-mining dumps, and Easter egg maps, opacity was a double-edged sword. To explain, he swerved over to *Street Fighter*.

“You’d have a whole competitive hierarchy in a local arcade, a local videogame store, where there was some character that was perceived as the best or the strongest because some person in the neighborhood was great with them,” he says. But in the next town over, arcade regulars battled with different tricks, different strategies, a different hierarchy of characters. Information was fragmented, localized.

“The reality is that almost everybody was playing the game wrong,” says Hazzikostas.

These days, before a new *Street Fighter* releases players have researched and number-crunched with the gusto of a rocket science research lab, assembling tier lists and theorizing

optimal move combos immediately posted on Reddit and YouTube. “The internet as a whole, the world as a whole, has refined the process of accelerating and socializing information, figuring out problems.” For Hazzikostas, tasked with stretching *World of Warcraft* into a larger and larger virtual universe, and sustaining an increasingly elusive sense of awe, that accessibility of information is both a curse and a blessing.

In its early days—fittingly for the fantasy genre—*World of Warcraft*’s magic was deeply intertwined with its sense of mystery. It was countless gamers’ first MMORPG; back then, the pull it had on millions of players was in part due to the vastness of its world and the long, rocky path to top level glory. To find a party, you’d stand in the city center and /shout until someone agreed to come with you. To teleport to another city, you’d track down and pay a mage. To attempt a raid, groups of dedicated players relied on the age-old method of trial and error. (This contributed to the viral “Leeroy Jenkins” meme, in which a player of that name abruptly sprints into a dungeon midway through a meticulous strategy explanation.)

“There were no rules. There was no right or wrong way to play. Just you and your pet wolf, as a hunter, trying to make your way in the world and figure things out from there,” says Hazzikostas.

Swimming around in this deep, cloudy sea, players had to search blindly for open hands to hold. This feeling of being teleported into an antagonistic, unknowable world forced players to use each other as buoys.

After 30 minutes of yelling “LFG SHAMAN LVL 40” before landing in a party, Hazzikostas says, players were “much more likely

to be tolerant of each other's faults. You probably weren't going to kick your healer who made a mistake from the group, because then you'd be back to spamming chat for 30 more minutes." If the healer kept everyone alive and was even a little nice, you'd be more likely to add them to your friends list for faster leveling next time. Strong networks of friends emerged from this, players who'd shift from discussing spell rotations to significant others, in text chat, third-party voice chat, or over the phone.

"There's an inverse relationship between friction and the strength of bonds that are formed as a result of that friction or to overcome that friction," says Hazzikostas.

Streamlined

Over the course of its life, *World of Warcraft*, like other still-relevant MMORPGs, has streamlined. Developers smoothed out the bumps slowing down players' pathways to the high-octane stuff—live-or-die raids and fanciful new landscapes—with automatic party-finders, quest markers, simplified gameplay systems and the like. Leveling is fast, and is slated to become 60 or 70 percent faster with *World of Warcraft*'s upcoming *Shadowlands* expansion. Players led much of this change, with aggressively aggregated information on forums, wikis, and walkthroughs, and the culture of optimized grinding that's now become the norm.

"Epic raid bosses were something only a small percentage of the playerbase got to experience," says Hazzikostas of the early days of *World of Warcraft*. "Today, a large share—something like over half—were able to defeat the biggest multiplayer raid encounters the game has."

World of Warcraft players are much, much better than they were back in the game's early days. "Today, people are almost trained to min-max," says Hazzikostas, referring to the play strategy of minimizing weaknesses and maximizing strengths.

“The community pushes people in that direction, especially socially. Even if it’s not your preferred playstyle, the people who may want you in your group or may not, are holding you to some of those standards. Once it’s knowable, you’re expected to know.” The answer to any mystery is a Google search away.

Nobody would trade the accessibility of information today for half a year stuck below level 40. But the resulting game—and the MMORPG genre, which took cues from *World of Warcraft*’s success—started to feel a little mercenary starting in the late aughts. The game is more casual, because both developers and players made it that way, so building player-to-player connections isn’t as vital. Although *World of Warcraft* included level-syncing and server-hopping to make it easier to play with preexisting friends, online strangers plugged into a party here or there became disposable.

Classic

In August 2019, a litmus test launched for how player behavior has changed over *World of Warcraft*’s lifetime. *World of Warcraft Classic* is a separate game capturing *World of Warcraft* as it was close to its release in 2006. Gameplay is fantastically inefficient. (“Meditative,” says Hazzikostas). To get somewhere, you probably have to hoof it. To track down the troll you’re supposed to give the tiger skins to, you have to run around and search. Even though ample guides and walkthroughs exist for *World of Warcraft Classic*, the game simply isn’t made to be blasted through at top speed. As a result, questing feels less like a means to an end than an end in itself.

Personally, I can’t play *World of Warcraft Classic* without add-ons—modern overlays that bring quality-of-life changes to the interface. On a second monitor, I Google specialized maps and leveling guides while ping-ponging my character from quest

to quest with the other hand, never interacting with strangers. Every now and then, while I'm swinging an ax against a raptor, a player might come up and ask whether I can help them complete the same quest. We ax down five or eight more raptors, and when we're done, we part ways.

When I told Hazzikostas that *World of Warcraft Classic* felt lonely, he described how, back in the day, much of the novelty of the game was the ability to talk to strangers online. He recalled his first time doing so, while running a dungeon, and the Texan and English accents he encountered over voice chat. "Today, that's the default," he says. "Today, almost every multiplayer console or PC game has voice chat, friend lists, social networking systems built into it. They're almost inescapable. That's not a unique selling point of *World of Warcraft*."

Although there isn't the same desperation to connect, and challenges are deconstructed the day they're released, the core of original *World of Warcraft* still holds up in *World of Warcraft Classic*, depending on what you define as the core. It's still a place where people gather, a fantasy-washed social media network. It's a slow-paced role-playing game with an ambient social element. And if you're playing with established friends, there's still the potential for an emotional buy-in.

"It's amazing how some of the old tropes you never quite get away from," says Hazzikostas. "I actually have a coworker who was one of the original developers on a *World of Warcraft*, whose name you'd definitely recognize if I said it, whose own personal *WoW Classic* group split up at level 60 over loot drama in Blackrock. This is a group of developers who played the game 15 years ago, worked on the game 15 years ago."

“Unexplored spaces”

When I asked Hazzikostas what sort of MMORPG he most wanted to exist if he wasn’t working on *World of Warcraft*, he paused for a second to think. “Something that surprises me, anew with the promise of unexplored spaces,” he said. “One of the biggest things that’s exciting about the concept of an MMO is going into an unexplored, undiscovered world. It’s almost the promise of something that somehow breaks all the rules we were talking about when it comes to how players understand and deconstruct systems.”

Citing *Sword Art Online* and *Ready Player One*, Hazzikostas described how today, with so much being knowable or seconds away from known, the core escapist fantasy behind the MMORPG genre is going somewhere so vast that it contains things we can’t even imagine.

“We have an incredibly passionate community we couldn’t be more grateful for, but we’re still always chasing that mystery, that fantasy of the unexplored and undiscovered.”

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