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# Social Movements in World of Warcraft

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## ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds provide new forms of social interaction. They offer alternative spaces where social functions can be carried out in online three-dimensional virtual environments. In this paper we explore how collective action on a global scale is enabled by these virtual worlds. We used qualitative research to examine the organization of one social movement in World of Warcraft (WoW), the most widely used massively multiplayer online role playing game in the world. Using New Social Movement Theory, our paper suggests that there are a number of differences between real world and virtual world social movements, namely in their (a) locality, (b) issues, (c) periods of activity, (d) hierarchies, and (e) membership.

## Keywords

Virtual Worlds, Social Movements, Organization, New Social Movement Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds enable millions of people to interact with one another through avatars in online three-dimensional worlds. These online worlds are often constructed to look much like the real world and contain mountains, trees, oceans, and wild creatures (Castronova, 2007). A virtual world can be defined as “a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented by avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (Bell, 2008 p. 2). Virtual worlds offer IS researchers opportunities to study virtual organizations, teams (Assmann et al., 2010; Schultze and Rennecker, 2007), social innovations and social movements (Bainbridge, 2009).

Historically, humans have employed many tactics to bring about change (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). Since social and political change is usually difficult if not impossible to achieve alone, people have often banded together with others to pursue common goals. This collection of people is called a social movement. Social movements are an important means of bringing out cultural and political changes through collective action (Staggenborg, 2011). Protests can be in the real world (e.g. as seen most recently in Egypt) or in the virtual world (Blodgett, 2009; Blodgett and Tapia, 2010; Castronova, 2005a; Robinson, 2008).

A social movement typically has a lifecycle with periods of growth, maintenance, and decline (Staggenborg, 2011). The objective of this study is to explore how social movements in virtual worlds organize themselves for collective action. To explore our research question: *How do virtual worlds affect the organization of social movements?* we examine a virtual world social movement in World of Warcraft (WoW) and analyze this movement using New Social Movement Theory (Melucci, 1989; Pichardo, 1997; Scott, 1990).

## WORLD OF WARCRAFT

WoW, made by Blizzard Entertainment, is the most popular massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) with over 12 million players globally (Blizzard, 2010b). A player in WoW assumes the role of a hero as they explore this virtual world. Players create a character (an avatar, or a toon) and can interact with thousands of other players in the same world to adventure together or fight against others. Players can form friendships, create alliances, and compete against enemies (Blizzard, 2010a). WoW provides a system where players group together into guilds. Guilds consist of several players with similar interests within one of the two in-game factions (Alliance or Horde), who provide opportunities for assistance with quests, social interactions, and protection from rival factions (Brignall and VanValey, 2007).

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements may seek political or economic liberation, or fight for lifestyle changes (Staggenborg, 2011). Social movements are collective actions of certain levels of organization and duration which employ non-institutionalized methods to bring about social change (Staggenborg, 2011), or increase social awareness (Vegh, 2003).

New Social Movement (NSM) Theory emphasizes new types of social movements, which have emerged in advanced capitalist societies. Examples of new social movements include women's, student, gay, lesbian, environmental, and peace movements (Staggenborg, 2011). NSMs are focused on the collective search for identity. Individuals seek new collectivities and social spaces to define their collective identity where they can experience and define novel lifestyles (Johnston et al., 1994). NSMs take collective action based on culture, ideology, and/or politics, and define collective identities through alternative sources such as ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Buechler, 1995).

NSMs break from earlier industrial era movements that focused on the redistribution of wealth, and now focus on concerns for forms of alternative lifestyles (Habermas, 2008; Pichardo, 1997). They promote direct democracy, self-help groups, and collaborative styles of social organization (Pichardo, 1997). NSM tactics tend to remain outside of normal political channels and use disruptive tactics to influence public opinion. They also employ pre-planned and highly dramatic forms of demonstration, often with costumes and other symbolic representations (Tarrow, 1994). NSM organizational structure also differentiates them from earlier industrial era movements. NSMs tend to organize themselves in a fluid non-rigid style. They tend to vote communally on issues, rotate their leadership, and employ temporary ad hoc organizations. Thus, NSMs create open, decentralized, non-hierarchical structures that are responsive to the needs of individuals (Pichardo, 1997).

NSMs emphasize action in the cultural sphere or civil society as the arena for collective action (Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1989), while stressing the important of strategies which promote self-determination and autonomy (Rucht, 1988). Rather than conflicts over material resources, NSMs tend to emphasize post-materialist values of collective action (Inglehart, 1990), while their grievances and ideologies are social constructed, rather than constructed from a groups structural location (Johnston et al., 1994; Klandermans, 1992). NSMs also present temporary, latent, and submerged networks which underlay collective action, rather than assuming that collective action emerges from centralized organizations (Melucci, 1989). Scott (1990) discusses the organizational form of new social movements, they: (1) are locally based, or centered around small groups; (2) organize around specific or local issues; (3) are characterized by cycles of movement activity and mobilization, i.e. periods of high or low activity; (4) have fluid hierarchies and loose systems of authority; and (5) have shifting membership and fluctuating members.

## METHODOLOGY

This study examined a social movement in WoW and used a qualitative research method called netnography, which is a form of ethnography for studying online communities (Kozinets, 2010; Myers, 2009). The collection of data in netnographic studies usually involves participant observation and interaction with community members (Myers, 2009). Netnographic researchers must be active in some part of the community and not be invisible to the people under investigation, but nor should they lead the community (Kozinets, 2010).

One of the researchers joined a social movement inside WoW. The researcher participated in movement activities such as an in-world parade and dance party, and carried out participant observation of movement members. Field notes were taken during involvement with the movement: this involved screen captures (WoW provides the ability to record the game in movie files), and note taking. The researcher also extracted data from the social movement's discussion forums. The researcher has three characters in the movement. The data for this study is based on participant observation and an analysis of approximately one hundred discussion forum posts. The fieldwork lasted for six months. Data analysis involved coding of discussion forum posts and field notes based on the major themes addressed by NSM.

### The Social Movement

The social movement used for this study is a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender movement, hereafter referred to as the LGBT movement. LGBT established itself in WoW in 2005 and has over 5,000 members (players) in WoW and has over 15,000 characters (it is possible for one player to add multiple characters). LGBT consists of one main guild and several smaller guilds. The movement has been profiled in a number of gay and lesbian magazines and in a prominent WoW blog website. LGBT is a global social movement with members from many countries. LGBT also maintains a website with discussion forums, has in-game socializing, and has activities such as an annual parade, dance parties, and group photographs.

## FINDINGS

In this section we present data based on our participant observation and involvement within the LGBT movement inside WoW.

### Location

WoW enables players from all around the world to interact with one another. The LGBT is a global movement, as is illustrated by figure 1 obtained from the LGBT movement's website. Each pin on the map represents an individual member of the LGBT movement.



**Figure 1. Location of members of GLBT group**

The group may have a global distribution within the real world, but within WoW it is “locally” (or server) based. WoW contains many different servers. Each server is an individual copy of the game, and players can only interact with other players on the same server. Another aspect of localization for LGBT is that it is a Horde based group. WoW has two main factions (Horde and Alliance) who are at war with each other. Therefore, for NSMs based in WoW, there are two categories of localization to be considered. The first is the global distribution of **players**, the second is the local distribution of **characters**.

### Issues

NSMs are organized around local or specific issues. The goal of this movement is “to better service the LGBT community and offer a safe, inclusive place to game for members of any sexual orientation or gender identity.” (LGBT movement website, 2010). Alongside general LGBT issues such as safe havens for members, the movement also contains various other LGBT related issues, often related to the real world geographical location of individual members. Due to the global distribution of players, these LGBT issues may vary. Some members may come from countries (or states) where governments ban homosexual acts, while others may come from countries that allow same sex marriage. This brings a wide range of real world issues into the movement. Some of the issues discussed in the movement include:

- Gay marriage;
- Cures for HIV;
- Support for shelters for LGBT youth;
- Gays in the military;
- Local politics/elections.

Not only does the movement deal with real world issues, but also issues inside the game. For example, WoW provides the functionality of allowing players to join group events to kill powerful monsters. Often this brings many different players together. One member of the LGBT movement discussed issues relating to homophobic language in these events:

*“[...] we have expanded outside of our little community in our day-to-day gametime and not everyone is as familiar with the <server name omitted> customs of politeness. How do you respond when someone uses “gay” or “fag” offensively?”* (Forum post, 26 December 2010).

This resulted in a discussion with other members during which various responses were offered. One member said he now says nothing because once when he did speak up against the homophobic language he was kicked out of the group. Another member said that he openly complains about the homophobic language in the group and then leaves, stating that it is just a game and should be a fun event so does not want to deal with this kind of language.

Another example of an in-game issue related to the design of the actual game. The game consists of pre-defined conversations with non-player characters (NPC). A player can click on an NPC and then a dialogue box will appear displaying some text said by the NPC. One member commented on how one of the NPCs makes a homophobic joke: *"Homogonized? No thank you, I like the ladies"*. Another member jokingly responds that this is discrimination. Although this post was meant to be light-hearted, it demonstrates that the virtual world itself contains potentially discriminatory comments predefined by the designers of the game.

### Periods of Activity

Similar to real-world LGBT movements, the LGBT movement in WoW periodically holds virtual world events. In June 2010, and for the sixth year running, the movement held a pride parade inside the game. The parade was attended by a large number of players (the exact number is only available to Blizzard). At the end of the parade various other activities took place such as a model competition named "Azeroth's Next Top Model". Some players temporarily changed the gender of their character, and most players performed spells that created lighting and sparkling effects around their character. In July 2010, the movement held a dance party in the city known as Shattrath. In October 2010, the movement had a guild photograph. Figure 2 illustrates these activities.



**Figure 2. Parade (left), dance party (middle), and guild photograph (right)**  
Image: ©2004 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved

The movement also holds real world meet ups for members of the community. A section of the movement's website is dedicated to organizing these meetings. Members have organized meetings in Australia, Canada, and the United States.

### Hierarchies

Fluid hierarchies and loose systems of authority characterize NSMs. However, this fluidity can be constrained to some extent in virtual world social movements. A technical requirement of WoW is that a guild must have a leader. The leader has administrative control over operations in the guild including giving individual members certain ranks and privileges (such as access to the guild bank), as well as adding and removing members.

The LGBT movement has a guild leader and officers. Officers (there are currently 19 officers) deal with the day to day running of the movement's activities: some are charged with organizing social events, while others deal with disciplining members who break the guild charter. However, the actual hierarchy of the movement is based on issues relating to gaming, as well as doing service to the movement. Hence the actual hierarchy of the movement is more structured than what would be found in a real world social movement. The organizational hierarchy of the LGBT group is as follows:

- Guild Leader;
- Officer;
- Member of Distinction;
- Member in good standing;
- Member under administrative discipline, no bank withdrawals, guild chat is allowed;
- Member under administrative discipline, no bank withdrawals, no guild chat.

The majority of members are ranked as members in good standing, which means the member has access to guild chat and guild bank. If a member breaks the guild charter for some reason, for example they are rude to other players, they may be

demoted to either of the lower ranks. Whenever a member is promoted (or demoted), an announcement is automatically made within the guild chat. Any players currently online will see the change.

### Membership

Membership is open to all members of the LGBT community as well as heterosexual members (as long as they do not discriminate). LGBT consists of eight guilds. As of January 2010, LGBT had a total of 5,737 unique members, which makes it the second largest guild in WoW. Each guild has its own guild chat channel that allows members of each guild to have discussions in game. Due to the technical requirements of the game, this means that members of another guild (even an affiliated guild) cannot share a guild chat channel. To overcome this, the LGBT movement created an add-on for the game that joins the chat channels for multiple guilds, thus allowing all eight guilds to combine their chat channels as though it were one channel.

An important aspect influencing the organization of the movement is the technological requirements of the virtual world. This was evident in October 2010 when Blizzard announced that it would cap the size of guilds to 600 members prior to the release of the next expansion pack, Cataclysm. Obviously this had a large impact on LGBT which far exceeded this number. The guild leader sent a message to all members outlining the problem:

*“[...] Blizzard is instituting a 600-person hard cap on guild size starting in patch 4.0.1, which we expect to be released next week. [...] larger guilds will be 'completely supported', but they will not be able to invite new members. This is clearly a serious situation for us and we have been discussing this both amongst ourselves and with the larger LGBT population [...] If you want a toon in the <LGBT> guild, NOW is the time to get your invite, as we won't be able to add anyone else to <LGBT> once the patch goes live.”* (Message from guild leader, 6 October 2010).

Over the next week, a large number of players added new characters to the guild. Blizzard later announced that the cap would be increased to 1020 members. A month later the guild leader again posted a message with more information about the changes.

*“[...] all guilds are now capped at 1020 characters, [...], LGBT had about 6200 characters in it. Those characters were allowed to remain in the guild, but we are not able to invite any new characters to LGBT. [...] we are making some changes designed to eventually bring LGBT down below the cap without inconveniencing most of our members. These changes include: Actively removing toons that haven't been played in 90 days or more, [...] and opening up a few more LGBT guilds and asking for people to voluntarily move [...]. We will begin by reopening <LGBT sub-guild>, and when Cataclysm hits we will be opening a new guild called <LGBT sub-guild 2>, [...].”* (Message from guild leader, 19 November 2010).

As a result of these actions, by late January 2011 the main LGBT guild had 3,500 players (down from 6,200). Inactive members were removed and many players volunteered to move their characters from the main guild to one or more of the sub-guilds. Later that same year, however, one of the sub-guilds disbanded from the LGBT movement altogether.

*“[...] I'm sorry to report that <name of sub-group> will be disbanding on Monday and with it comes the end of our raid group as we know it today.”* (Forum post, 9 October 2010).

Despite this apparent fragmentation, many of the members who disbanded continued to leave characters in the LGBT movement. This illustrates that within virtual world social movements individual members can create multiple characters within a group and move them around as they see fit. Memberships between guilds can be fluid.

### DISCUSSION

Real world NSMs are locally based (Johnston et al., 1994; Klandermans, 1992; Scott, 1990). However virtual world movements differ in some respects. The first dimension, *locality*, has two key differences to be considered when a social movement becomes virtual. The first difference is that virtual worlds enable members who would not normally become active in social movements to participate. This is in line with research on social movements on the Internet (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002; Salter, 2003). The second key difference is that members of virtual worlds are constrained by the technological requirements of the human designers of that world. In WoW a social movement can exist only on one faction, and it is limited to certain virtual world spatial locations. It is possible that a social movement could create a movement on the opposite faction, even with the same players, however they cannot interact in the virtual world unless the players log back in as characters on the same faction. Table 1 summarizes the organizational differences between real world and virtual world social movements.

Concept	Real World	Virtual World
Locality	Locally based.	Potential for global distribution of players, but local distribution of characters.
Issues	Specific or local issues.	Potential for members to bring their own local issues to the virtual arena, thus a hybrid of local, global, and in-world issues
Periods of Activity	High/low periods of activity.	High/low periods of activity. Activities could include both virtual and real world activities. New methods of expressiveness.
Hierarchies	Fluid hierarchies. Loose systems of authority.	Stronger hierarchies, influenced by the (current) virtual world technological requirements. Immediately visible methods of promotion/demotion.
Membership	Shifting membership and fluctuating members.	Highly influenced by changes to virtual world by designers. Players may have multiple characters, which can move between groups, thus higher levels of membership fluctuation.

**Table 1. Organizational differences between real world and virtual world social movements**

Grievances in real world NSMs are socially constructed, and not based on a groups location (Johnston et al., 1994; Klandermans, 1992). For virtual world movements, grievances may indeed be socially constructed from the real world, but then these issues are collectively aggregated into the virtual world. Therefore, the second dimension, *issues*, is different for virtual worlds in two ways. Firstly, when a social movement such as the one presented in this study offers membership to large numbers of individuals, there is the chance for individual members to bring issues relating to their own real world locality into the virtual world movement. Virtual worlds also allow multiple people from different backgrounds to come together (Papargyris and Poulymenakou, 2008; Quandt and Wimmer, 2008). This implies that rather than only local issues (Scott, 1990), virtual world movements bring issues related to the users real world location. The second difference is related to the construction of the virtual world itself. Virtual worlds are created by a team of designers and developers who create elaborate story lines for players. As was illustrated in this study, some portions of that design may be considered discriminatory by members of a community. Hence players experience a hybrid of issues, from the game world itself, through to local and global issues (Papargyris and Poulymenakou, 2008).

The third dimension, *periods of activity*, has similarities and differences to real world social movements. The similarity is that the activities performed by the social movement are characterized by periods of high and low activity, for example a virtual protest (Blodgett, 2009; Blodgett and Tapia, 2010; Castronova, 2005a; Robinson, 2008). A virtual world social movement may also hold regular events, such as the pride parade and dance party held annually by the LGBT. This is similar to real world social movements which stresses the importance of self-determination, autonomy, and self-expression (Inglehart, 1990; Rucht, 1988). NSMs often show highly dramatic forms of demonstration (Tarrow, 1994), the difference however, is that virtual worlds also allow players to express themselves in ways not possible in the real world, such as gender swapping (Boellstorff, 2008).

The fourth dimension, *hierarchies*, is quite different in virtual worlds. NSMs are characterized by fluid hierarchies and loose systems of authority (Pichardo, 1997; Scott, 1990), and often temporary, latent, or submerged networks (Melucci, 1989). In virtual worlds, however, social movements are restricted by the technical requirements of the virtual world. WoW for example, requires any individuals planning to form a long-term group to create a guild. Each guild must have one leader, although the leader can delegate certain leadership roles to other members. All guilds are then listed on the WoW website which makes them visible to anyone seeking this information. In-world, the guild name that a character belongs to is displayed about the players head which increases movement visibility. Although a real world social movement may consist of multi-headed leadership (Gerlach and Hine, 1970), the hierarchy of a virtual world social movement is constrained by the technical requirements of the virtual world. Hence there are hybrid hierarchies in the social and virtual world (Blodgett and Tapia, 2010).

The last dimension, *membership*, is also highly influenced by the technological requirements of the virtual world. As we have seen, the size of the LGBT movement was impacted by changes made by the designers of WoW. As a result of changes enforced by Blizzard, LGBT was forced to reorganize. This is something that is quite different to real world social movements that have no technological requirements constraining their actions. Castronova (2005b) says that the designers of virtual worlds are gods and users of these worlds must follow whatever decisions they make. Movements have periods of growth and decline (Staggenborg, 2011), and changes made by designers may force a virtual world movement to decline prematurely. Of course, WoW is a product of Blizzard Entertainment (Nardi, 2010). However, we found that the LGBT

movement was able to overcome some of the technological limitations imposed by Blizzard. LGBT created an add-on to the game (Taylor, 2008) to enable communication between all of the LGBT guilds. Lastly, it is important to consider the differences between players and characters. One player may create multiple characters (Bainbridge, 2010; McKenna et al., 2010), with only some of those characters being members of the movement, and often those characters move between sub-groups of the same movement. Real world movements have fluctuating membership (Scott, 1990), however this effect may be stronger in virtual world movements.

## CONCLUSION

Researchers of social movements consider that social movements are ubiquitous in society, with some arguing that we live in a “movement society” (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998) or a “movement world” (Snow et al., 2003). This paper has examined how social movements are now organizing themselves via virtual worlds. The use of virtual worlds enables social movements to engage in collective action on a global scale. Specifically, we have looked at the organizational aspects of new social movement theory and applied this theory to a virtual world social movement. We found a number of differences and similarities when this theory is compared against real world and virtual world social movements.

We have seen, on the one hand, how social action in a virtual world is constrained by the designers and controllers of that world. We have also seen, on the other hand, how the members of a social movement can try to overcome the limitations of that world. Sometimes people can use the virtual world in a totally different way from what the designers intended. The most notable example of this is shown by some of the activities of the LGBT movement: WoW is a game where the whole point is ostensibly to fight against others, but LGBT uses parades and dance parties to promote “a safe, inclusive place” for members of the movement.

We recognize that there are a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, we acknowledge that this study is based entirely on WoW, and as such some of the concepts presented here are very WoW reliant. Our second limitation is that this study has presented only one social movement. Future studies could examine how social movements are organized in other virtual worlds which may have different technological requirements, and further explain the relationships between virtual worlds and social movements. Further research could also determine if virtual world movements have any influence on real world movements.

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