

World of Warcraft, VoIP and dating

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On a cool October night, Laura Bowser, 27, returns home from her post-work run to her modest town house. She soon finds herself flopped into a high-backed leather office chair poring over her Macintosh keyboard as she sends instant messages to her boyfriend.

As the two exchange messages, she positions her Mac's USB microphone closer for an audio chat. Once an audio connection has been established, she logs into World of Warcraft, a popular medieval/fantasy-themed massive multiplayer online role-playing game by Blizzard Entertainment. Quickly finding her boyfriend's character, the couple meet up on screen, discuss the quests or dungeons they'll try to beat that night, then spend the next several hours talking and playing together.

Sometimes they casually chat, other times they focus intently on the current task or quest at hand, devising intricate strategies for overcoming difficult opponents or puzzles within the game.

At the end of the evening, much like any typical date, the two wish each other a good night and talk about meeting up for dinner and a movie that weekend -- this time in person.

"Traditionally, the 'American date' consists of the guy picking up the girl at her parents' house, bringing flowers and taking her to dinner and/or a movie. I haven't been on an 'American date' since high school," said Bowser, explaining the situation. "The whole point of a date is to spend time together to learn about the other person and decide if you're compatible with them. Some people go for walks in the park. We play

video games."

Voice communication has been present in online games for several years now with groups using both free and commercial software packages to coordinate their efforts. For less than \$50 a player can purchase a USB microphone or headset to attach to his or her computer, then add the contact information of friends and initiate a conference call between the group members through freely downloaded communications software such as Teamspeak, Ventrilo, Skype, Gizmo Project and AOL Instant Messenger before logging into the game to play together.

Whether or not the designers had romantic conversations in the midst of game play in mind when they created their product remains to be seen.

"It's a way of interacting with other people together that allows you to not worry about going out or places not being open when you have your free time," said Blake Ehrlich, a 21-year-old teacher and graduate student currently playing two characters in World of Warcraft. "These are people with similar interests, and you find single people, couples and entire families that you can play with and have fun.

"I think the only place this can go is that new massively multiplayer online games that will be incorporating voice chat into their user interfaces," Ehrlich said when asked about social elements of online video games. "No longer does it cost hundreds of dollars to have a significant other across the country. Now it's free with programs like Skype. Meeting up in games and playing together gives you something to share and do."

"As far as voice programs in general, I have used Teamspeak and Ventrilo to converse with guild mates. It's nice to know what kind of person is behind the other computer," said Michael Crocker, 30, an IT Consultant with Texas A&M University. "However, my roommate and

his girlfriend play together quite often. They will schedule times to play together."

Other players seemed more skeptical of the situation.

"I know this happens. My old (game) guild master actually recently married a girl he met in-game. They spoke via TeamSpeak and in-game via text, met and that was that.

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