

World of Warcraft focus of millions

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A long day over and done with, they return in the millions to their homes and apartments. Heading over to their computers, they sit down and open "The Program." Introductory music emanates from their speakers.

A night of video gaming is about to unfold as the evening's entertainment.

Although this would have been a hallmark of social awkwardness and almost unheard of 10 years ago, it's becoming more and more common. As of the end of 2005 Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft, the most popular massively multiplayer online role playing game currently on the market, reached its 5 millionth subscriber with players in Australia, America, New Zealand, Europe and Asia.

Where once a rented movie, a night out with friends, a few drinks or a good book might have sufficed for the evening, more and more people are finding themselves passing time by slaying opponents, helping their groups with missions or gaining experience points toward a higher level or rank.

Massively multiplayer online games, which are typically played with and against thousands of other players through the Net via a PC or video-game console, are becoming a more common form of entertainment, having grown beyond youth markets and attracting adult players in the 18- to 35-year-old demographic. In the case of World of Warcraft, the title has been able to gather a wide player base, each user paying \$12.99 to \$14.99 per month to play by offering multiple styles of game play.

Once an account has been created, users can create an unlimited number of custom characters to play as, choosing sub-races available to either the Horde or Alliance factions within the game. This choice affects which missions, storylines and events they'll confront in the game as well as places them in direct contention with opposing forces should they choose to fight competitively.

Like many other online games, World of Warcraft offers a wide variety of play styles and activities available to the user. Players can take on different professions throughout the game that can provide useful items to use or trade. Different play styles can be chosen throughout the course of the game and Blizzard Entertainment has segmented their player base into different game modes, some more cooperative or competitive than the others while others focus heavily on providing the expected role-playing elements that are anticipated with a fantasy-themed video game.

"I started playing in December of 2004 after several friends picked it up and started raving about it," said Eli Sarver, a 29-year-old systems analyst and fan of the game. Averaging between 15 and 25 hours of game play per week, he devotes many nights to his game group's online activities, such as shared quests and missions. "I got into it because the storyline seemed solid. It's obvious that there is a lot of background material, and it makes the world feel more real."

"World of Warcraft did a great job in reducing the typical play time of a standard game session," explained Constance Steinkhueler, an assistant professor within the University of Wisconsin, Madison's Curriculum and Instruction department with regard to the game's attraction points for players. Steinkhueler pointed out that in other online games, a player might need to play for four to six hours to feel as if they'd made progress with their character, whereas World of Warcraft has managed to provide a satisfying experience to more casual players, who could invest less play time and still feel as if they'd advanced their online character.

World of Warcraft is expected to grow even more with the release of its Burning Crusade expansion pack, planned for release later this year. The expansion, which will be available as a commercial upgrade, will feature a new continent, spells, quests, items, abilities, two new races to play as, a new profession and 10 additional levels to play through.

Albeit World of Warcraft doesn't require a jaw-dropping computer to run, it is geared toward mid to high-end computers. The game, which is available for both the Mac OS X and Windows operating systems, requires Windows 2000 or XP, an 800 MHz processor, 512 MB of RAM, a video card with 32 MB of VRAM, 6.0 gigabytes of hard drive space, a 4x CD-ROM drive and a 56K or faster Internet connection to run on the PC.

On the Mac end, the game requires a 933 MHz G4, G5 or Intel processor, 512 MB of RAM, a video card with 32 MB of VRAM, 6.0 gigabytes of hard drive space, a 4X CD-ROM drive and a 56K or faster Internet connection. Additional upgrades such as faster processors, broadband Internet connections, higher end video card and extended RAM will allow the game to be run faster and at a higher resolution.

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