

Networks of WoW gamers, Etsy crafters to be focus of new study of creative collaborations

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There are between 200,000 and 500,000 user-created World of Warcraft videos, called machinimas, online today. The nearly eight-minute machnima Craft of War: BLIND, pictured above and available through a link in this release, has received an estimated 4 million views and 17,000 viewer comments, and IU researchers believe that trail of information could provide clues about creativity and massive collaborative projects. Credit: Perculacraft

Using two of the planet's largest, creative online communities -- World of Warcraft gamers and Etsy artists -- as their laboratory, two Indiana University Bloomington researchers hope to understand how the inner workings of such massive, networked collaborations could benefit scientists, corporations and the very IT designers who facilitated the

success of the two online communities.

"Massive communities of creativity like those represented by World of Warcraft (WoW) and Etsy have a structurally different model from the small teams of professionals working in the environments that major professional creative applications from Adobe, Autodesk and Microsoft were designed for," said IU Bloomington School of Informatics and Computing Assistant Professor Jeffrey Bardzell.

Bardzell and co-investigator Shaowen Bardzell, also an assistant professor at the school, have received a \$686,000 grant from the National Science Foundation's Division of Information and [Intelligent Systems](#) to investigate and construct a history of the two large-scale collaborations and to then try and model how the two [online communities](#) successfully created and distributed productivity on a scale involving millions of users.

"Such a model could lead to the design of software tools to support massive creative collaborations in the sciences, as well as help to clarify the organizational and communications environments needed to support them," Shaowen Bardzell added.

With respect to WoW, a massive online player game with more than 11 million users, the researchers will study a sampling of a creative product called machinima, which are user-created videos that number upwards of a half-million on sites like YouTube, Warcraftmovies.com and machinima.com. Even though any given machinima video may have been made by a small number of people, the researchers will use critical and systematic analysis of major WoW videos to tease out the history of machinima and place that next to their inquiry into the nature of massively amateur creativity.

"When we talk about population-level creativity, we don't mean in a

single video per se, but rather in the visual language out of which the video is made," Jeffrey Bardzell said. "By analogy, a thriller in theatres today may have influences of Hitchcock and Polanski in it, because these two directors have helped construct today's cinematic language of the thriller. But we obviously don't say that the film was directed by Hitchcock and Polanski."

One WoW machinima on YouTube of a funeral created for an actual WoW gamer who passed away has received 4.5 million views, and another called Craft of War: BLIND, has had 4 million views and received more than 17,000 viewer comments on various WoW-related sites.

The second massive creative network to be studied, Etsy, unlike WoW is dominated by women and has hundreds of thousands of individual vendors spread over 150 countries. Each month it accounts for almost one million product sales valued at around \$15 million.

"Etsy's modes of production, folk theories of creativity and what is 'quality,' and social understandings may be gendered in a way that differs from that of the male-dominated WoW machinima community," Shaowen Bardzell noted. "The goal here is to not only understand network-based participatory creativity, but specifically to consider it from the perspective of a female mode of creative knowledge production."

Examples of how Etsy's members use the site to explain creative processes and educate shoppers about products can be viewed [here](#) and also [here](#).

Hoping to bring clarity to the relationships between the creative practices of small professional teams and those of massive collaborations like WoW and Etsy, the Bardzells, who are married, see new opportunities

arising for the design of creativity-support software and for an extension of successful, emergent network-based creative practices into the areas of professional innovations and scientific collaboration.

"Our community, the human-computer interaction community, needs to develop an understanding of these new appropriations of creative software," Jeffrey Bardzell said. "And the science education community also has a stake in this work as most of these networks have home-grown and successful models of teaching and learning as one of their core social activities. In other words, these communities not only innovate in aesthetics, but also in pedagogy."

Provided by Indiana University

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