

## Property Practices in *World of Warcraft*

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*Observing property practices that occur in the online world of World of Warcraft means dealing with a complex phenomenon. Property inside the virtual world is socially constructed using a set of technical possibilities given to players by game designers. Objects here are not only digital entities without any reference to the physical world, but they are described by a unique set of properties that cannot be found anywhere else. Dealing with this set of possibilities is the way players generate the in-game property. This kind of property is obviously bound to the specific game one is studying, but can provide useful information about how social phenomena can be transformed in a fully digital environment.*

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Over the last years, Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have emerged as a remarkable stage, where it is possible to observe spontaneous social phenomena. *World of Warcraft* (WoW) (2004), with more than ten million subscribers all over the world, is so far the most successful video game of the genre. The goal of this article is to describe how property is reconstructed in the virtual environment of WoW, and what kind of emergent social phenomena are related to this form of *virtual property*. In order to do that, the article will briefly discuss how it is possible to investigate social phenomena within a MMORPG from a theoretical point of view. The article will also briefly introduce some reflections on property as it is described and experienced in everyday offline experience. Finally, the work describes how property is imple-

mented in WoW's mechanics, and what kinds of unexpected behaviour between players emerge from that implementation.

WoW is, as many other MMORPGs are, a very peculiar game, and includes more than one game-line. Using a goal-oriented perspective, we can describe WoW as at least two different games at the same time. Using Juul (2005), I see WoW both as a game with optional goals (at least as long as the character does not reach the top level) and as a game without a goal (when the character starts running *instances* and *raid instances* at the top level). The first expansion of WoW (*The Burning Crusade* released in 2007) moved the top level from the previous level 60 to the current level 70, while *The Wrath of the Lich King* from 2008 moves it to level 80. This means that the time spent bringing a character to the top level can easily be counted in weeks or even months. Consequentially, this levelling time cannot be regarded as a secondary aspect of the real game or described as a training phase. WoW keeps two goal-types in one game, as it is clearly stated by the high level players' mantra: "at level 70, that's another game!"

Complex games such as WoW are probably better described with a multi-dimensional approach, as suggested by Aarseth (2008). This kind of approach seems more suitable when we describe how the property has been implemented as a part of the virtual world, and how that implementation affects the emergence of social phenomena. Within the goals of this article, this means observing how the property has been implemented in the game by maintaining the global sense of worldliness that MMORPGs require (Castronova 2005). Aarseth (2008) suggests six game research perspectives in order to observe the WoW phenomenon: ontological, aesthetic, player-oriented, critical, utilitarian, and exploratory. This article focuses on only two of them: the ontological and the player-oriented.

The ontological perspective describes game mechanism and game structure, while the player-oriented focuses on the player's experience and motivations. In addition to Aarseth's point of view, I would argue that the player's experience should not only be observed as the single player's experience, but that one should also be able to describe how the player interacts with others, and what kind of social behaviour is generated by these interactions. A good description of in-game social pheno-

mena can only be obtained by combining, at least, these two perspectives of analysis. What happens inside a MMORPG from a social point of view is defined by how the game's specific affordances (described by the ontological perspective) interact with the actual behaviour of the players (described by the player-oriented perspective). Social phenomena are always emergent phenomena, and observing them in MMORPGs forces the researchers to bridge those two research perspectives. Complex phenomena need complex approaches in order to be fully explained. A complex approach to this article's goal will then be developed in three steps: a) define our research topic from a social and economic point of view, b) identify it within the formal system of the game-world, and c) observe how players interact with it, generating social practices.

### **Property, an Ancient Debate**

In order to observe how property has been implemented in WoW, this article will briefly introduce the theoretical debate about property as it has evolved during the last centuries. Due to the non-juridical nature of this article, this will be a very quick summary that merely aims to illustrate the theoretical answers to the question: "Why do we have property?" We will examine the three most important justifications for property: the labour theory, the personhood theory and utilitarianism. According to Carrier and Lastowka (2007), this group of theories is often considered as the base of every modern thought on property. To this set of theories, I am adding the definition of property given by a sociological approach, such as the social system theory. After that I will try to describe how all these theories can explain the digital environment of WoW.

The labour theory of property, mainly developed by John Locke (1988/1689), describes the right of property as the natural evolution of human work, able to bring the environment away from the *state of nature*. Whatever has been produced with human labour can become private property, with the moral restriction that "Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy. As soon as we appropriate more than we can use, we surpass the bounds God has placed on property". This theory consequentially assumed that the value of an item was mainly to be found within human labour. The second theory of property is the personhood theory, developed by Friedrich Hegel (1967). This describes

property as an externalisation of the individual will. Every person has the right to express him- or herself by forming, making, and possessing things. This specific theory makes a distinction between *fungible objects*, that are fully interchangeable with money, and *personal property* that is so strictly connected to the personal identity that it cannot be sold or exchanged (Carrier & Lastowka 2007, 1492). The last and most widespread theory of property is utilitarianism. The purpose that property achieves, according to this theory, is to provide incentives for the development of land and material, and to prevent the depletion of finite resources (Carrier & Lastowka 2007, 1493).

All the presented theories describe property from the economic point of view. There are obviously many different disciplines that have studied property and that have developed many useful theories. For the purpose of this article however (to observe how property has been implemented in WoW's game mechanism), we are going to present just one more theory of property that comes from sociological studies.

According to social systems theory, property mainly serves to avoid conflicts that could arise due to the scarcity of resources (Luhmann 2000, 130). According to Luhmann, what a comprehensive property theory has to explain is not the personal attempt to obtain more things but the social acceptance of that, mainly when it comes to scarce resources. Every theory we have presented stresses some specific aspect of property: Locke focuses on the outcome of labour, personhood theory on personal identity, utilitarianism on better use of scarce resources, and social systems theory on the avoided conflict about resources. Nevertheless, all these theories have been developed for the offline world, and they might not automatically work well in a digital environment. In order to explore the limits and possibilities of these theoretical approaches when applied to a specific MMORPG such as WoW, this article will firstly describe how property has been implemented in the game.

### **Property in *World of Warcraft*: Old Theories for a New World**

To understand the possible forms of property in WoW, it is necessary to describe how objects and items are realized in the game, and what kind of limitations and possibilities WoW's virtual objects offer to the players. WoW objects are defined by a set of game-specific characteristics: requi-

red skill, quality, and item bound type. Required skill is the specific skill you need to master if you want to use a specific kind of object (e.g a one-hand sword or a rifle).

Even if we could detect some kind of analogy between this characteristic and what happens in the real world, it is important to stress that in MMORPGs (as in every virtual world), code-specified rules are not supposed to be respected, but are rather something one cannot avoid to respect. Even if, in our offline experience, I have never been taught how to shoot, I could start hunting and learn how to do it. In WoW there is no way for a mage to learn how to use a rifle or how to use a two hand axe; he simply cannot use the item.

Quality is a characteristic that is supposed to show how good an item is. It is visually represented with a colour scale that goes from pale grey for poor quality items to orange for legendary items. In some ways, quality of a specific object is linked to the scarcity of the item itself: high quality objects are very hard to find, while all players have bags full of poor quality items. Item bound type describes a unique characteristic that some objects have in WoW. Specific objects can *bind themselves* to a character when picked up, being equipped or used. When an object is bound to a character, the character can neither sell nor exchange it with any other character or non-player-character (npc). This characteristic is not necessarily linked to any other characteristic, but powerful items found by killing monsters in an instance usually tend to bind themselves when picked up or used by a character. This characteristic has no equivalence in our experience in real life, and it is a core element of WoW's property experience. The bound type also defines what kind of action you can realize with a specific item once you have got it. According to the official WoW web site,<sup>1</sup> there are five bound types in the game: not bound, bind on equip, bind on use, bind on acquire, and quest items. Every single type describes a set of possibilities (table 1).

Bound type	Items can be:
Not bound	<i>equipped, shared, sold, disenchanting, dropped, destroyed</i>

*Cont'd.*

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Binds on Acquire	<i>disenchanted, dropped, destroyed</i>
Binds on Equipment	<i>(before equipment): gifted, sold</i> <i>(after equipment): disenchanted, dropped</i>
Binds on Use	<i>(before use): gifted, sold</i> <i>(after use): disenchanted, dropped, destroyed</i>
Quest Items	<i>(always bounded to the character) dropped</i>

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*Table 1. Sets of Possibilities for Bound Types in World of Warcraft.*

The table shows that social interaction based on items (e.g. trade, donation, exchange) can happen only within a narrow way defined by game mechanics. Within this perspective, the world's rules define a field of possibilities where continuous social interactions between players can realize emerging social practices. Describing how items have been implemented in WoW causes us to ask; which of the previously described theories of property fits this scenario best?

*Locke in World of Warcraft:* labour theory, based mainly on the outcome of work as a source for private property, cannot really describe WoW property experience. Crafted items are just a small part of the whole set of items, and surely not the most significant. In addition, many of the most powerful items a character can create will bind themselves to the creator, making any kind of commerce impossible.

*Character's personhood:* personhood theory can surely better explain some of the phenomena related to the in-game property that we face in WoW. As in many other MMORPGs, there is a strong connection between the character and the items (mainly gears or weapons) that he/she has or can use. In WoW, wearing a specific tabard can tell much about the time that character has spent in a specific area or about his ranking. In some ways, the binding mechanism resembles the difference personhood theory makes between *fungible objects* that can be traded (i.e. they are not bound to the character) and *personal property* that is too important for personal identity to be sold (i.e. it is bound to the character). We must not however take the analogy too far, because in personhood theory, what is fungible and what is personal is a free choice of the sub-

ject, while in WoW the distinction between bound or unbound objects comes from the game world, and the character can only try to find a way to deal with it.

*Utilitarianism in WoW:* WoW is surely a world with many scarce and desirable resources. High quality items are very hard to find, and many other valuable resources require a lot of time to be created. In spite of that, utilitarianism does not really catch the property of WoW since it describes property as a way to prevent the waste of finite resources, while in WoW scarcity is not related to finitude at all. Due to the digital nature of WoW items, availability virtually lacks limits. The only limits we have are those imposed to the world by the game code. The scarcity of items in WoW is usually described with a value called *drop rate*, which is the average frequency with which a specific item has been found by killing a specific monster. If a player waits in the same spot for a given time after a kill, the same monster will appear again and again, with the same probability of *dropping* that specific item. So, given an infinite amount of time, every *scarce* resource is obtainable by every player in the game. Within this scenario, where items are scarce but not limited, it seems impossible to describe property as a way to avoid waste and to ensure a better utilization of resources.

*Conflicts for property:* the last theory about property we presented, the social system theory, describes property as a way to avoid conflict between people when resources are scarce and desirable. Is that kind of conflict possible in WoW? Opposite to what happens in real life and in many other MMORPGs, characters cannot be sources of valuable items: characters can kill other characters<sup>2</sup> but they cannot loot them, and pick-pocketing is possible only against monsters. Since these limitations are set at the code level, there is no way for a character to act against another character for a property issue. If someone takes an item I want, I cannot kill him in order to get it, nor can I steal it. In addition, if the object I want is a *bind on pickup* object, the other player is in effect unable to give it to me, no matter what he would like to do.

What we have described here is what things look like within the game world, but WoW cannot really be observed as a closed system, since the players behind characters are obviously part of the game. Within this perspective, the property seems more aimed at avoiding conflicts

between the player and the game, by making players settle for the fact that someone else might have something that they wish to have. In-game property makes players accept a certain amount of annoyance as a normal part of the worldliness of the game.

So which of the presented theories deals best with the specific virtual property as implemented in WoW? None of the theories is really able to fully deal with WoW's property, mainly because most theories of property have been developed to explain a real world scenario, and fail to explain a digital environment such as WoW. Nevertheless, using a combination of the provided theories we could try to point out three aspects of property as it emerges in WoW. Property is character based, player aimed, and part of the worldliness of the world.

Property is character based because of the actual relationship that items in WoW have with the specific character. Several items are bound to the character, and often serve to tell the personal story of the character or his/her power and abilities. As the personhood theory proposes, items can extend the personality of the character, and bear witness to it in the game-world. At the same time, property in WoW seems to be aimed at the player. It is the player that has to accept and deal with an unequal distribution of desirable resources in the world. To the game developer, it is a considerable problem if a player decides to quit the game based on being too upset by the impossibility to have the desired gear. Property therefore, from this perspective, seems to be a strategy to keep players playing by promising them that, with the right amount of time, they will be able to obtain that desired, valuable, scarce (but unlimited) resource. As a last point, property is part of the virtual world's worldliness. Players are so accustomed to property in real life, that they expect it in a virtual environment, even where there is no physical or economical motivation for it.

### **New Deviant Practices**

Let us now investigate whether property, as implemented in WoW, can lead to specific and emerging kinds of deviance and deviant practices. A deviant practice, within this perspective, is something rather different from cheating. While cheating can surely have a complex and many-fold meaning depending on the player's motivations or goals (Consalvo 2007),



a *deviant practice* here designates an action fully performed within the formal rules of the game, but which has been labelled as a *bad* way of playing by the shared game culture.<sup>3</sup> The essence of a deviant practice is mainly social, as social is the kind of repression that those practices can face. We are now describing the phenomena of ninja looting as a deviant practice, specifically related to the property as implemented in WoW.

Ninja looting is the activity, performed by a player, to take loot to which he or she is not entitled. This might happen in a number of different ways, e.g. rolling on every drop, regardless of the class or skills of the characters; looting a corpse without permission after everyone passed on a Binds on Pickup object; rolling an object when the raid leader said that everyone should pass. While most deviant practices in WoW are prevented by the code of the game, the looting phase opens up an uncertain scenario of interaction between players. During the looting phase, a player must believe that other players are going to follow looting rules, but at the same time, there is no way to predict the way they are going to act. It is mainly a matter of trust. Players are asked to be confident about something they cannot really control. Despite the high level of control that game structure has in different aspects of the game, the looting phase is extraordinarily free. The game does not check any correspondence between characters' classes or skills and items that they are going to roll. During an instance run, we could easily observe a dialogue like this:

**P1:** Can I need on this? I've already had the sandals from this set.

**PL.:** NO! It's a priest set.

**P1:** Ok.

In the reported example, P1 chooses to act according to the party leader's (PL) orders, even if there was no real way for the leader to enforce his order. The looting phase is a moment where people choose to fulfil mutual assumptions – or not to fulfil them. The looting phase requires a mutual collaboration between players, and sometimes players are supposed to give up on their actual needs.

In these terms, looting practices can be appropriately described using game theory. Game theory has been widely used to describe social interactions that require cooperation between social actors. It has also proved

to be a valid analytical tool to describe cooperation in multiplayer environments (Smith 2006). Looting in WoW could be described as a game with a sum other than zero, quite similar to the famous prisoner's dilemma: a player might follow loot rules (collaborating with others players) or he might ninjaloot (breaking the social rules and the collaboration, in order to gain personal profits). Putting it simply: given a party of two members, a looting could lead to four distinct situations.

In the first case (A), both players follow loot rules (they pass if they do not care about the object, they greed if they want to sell or disenchant the object, and they need if they need it). The result will probably be that someone will have something he really needs, and someone else will be unlucky for the drop or for the roll. In the medium term after several looting sessions, we can imagine having an equal distribution of drops.

Then we have two options, (B) and (C), which are specular: one player acts according to the loot rules, while the other acts as a ninja looter. The most probable result is that the loyal player would soon leave the group, but as long as the party goes on, the ninja looter stands a higher chance of obtaining more valuable items.

The last possible combination is when everyone acts as a ninja looter, case (D). Since they all have to roll for the drop when they press the need button, the outcome seems to be quite similar to the first one (A). When considered more in depth however, we would detect a substantial difference. In case (D), the distribution of items will be completely unintentional and could easily lead the party to the absurd result of characters full of items that they cannot use (e.g. a mage might have leather armours and bows, while a rogue might have fine cloth robes and wands). The result would be a common damage rather than a common good. And since most of the valuable items would probably be *Binds on Pickup* objects, there would be no possibility to sell or exchange those useless items later on.

The fact that it is easy to notice a game design characteristic, such as the bound-type objects, directly influences socially deviant practices such as ninja looting. There is, further, another aspect that should be observed when we describe the phenomenon of ninja looting: the character's reputation. In WoW, especially in high-end games, cooperation with other players is required in order to play the game. We could describe reputa-

tion as a strategic resource to be used in order to play with other players. If my character, or my guild,<sup>4</sup> has gained bad reputation in the game, it would make it much more difficult for me to find players available to play with me. A sentence like the one quoted here:

**P1:** didn't notice that there are two [guildname] guys in this group... think I'm going to leave it soon.

suggests that the reputation of a player, or of a guild, can change other players' expectations. In the quoted fragment P1 assumes that since the [guildname] guild has a bad reputation, every member will act in that way. Acquiring a bad reputation in a closed world such as WoW might easily lead a player or his/her guild to be excluded from many activities that require grouping. Joining high level raid instances could be quite impossible if a character or his/her guild achieves the reputation of ninja looter, and this might mean being unable to play important parts of the game. This is another example where social phenomena and game mechanisms closely interact. At this level of analysis, one might observe that social regulation and social order seem to emerge from the constant interaction of technical and relational aspects of the game.

### **Conclusion**

My aim with this article has been to contribute to the larger and ongoing conversation about emergent social phenomena within virtual worlds (Taylor 2006), observing and describing a specific social phenomenon. MMORPGs today represent a brand new field of analysis for game studies, a field that require theoretical instruments borrowed from other disciplines, such as economy, sociology or social psychology. This requirement is mainly due to the brand new kind of interaction that players actualize in MMORPGs. In WoW, interactions are not merely simple human-computer interactions, but a lot of time is dedicated to interacting with real people. Human-human interaction in virtual worlds (as part of the computer mediated communication) is not only typical of MMORPGs; every game, when played in multiplayer mode, is mainly focused on human-human interactions. What makes MMORPGs different is that these interactions take place within a structured world with

a temporal continuum. Interactions take place in a world-like environment defined as persistent, physical and interactive by Castronova (2005). This means that every social phenomenon takes place in a specific digital environment that has to be taken into consideration in order to define how social dynamics and game design interact. This should be one of the research goals of game scholars today: to reach an inner comprehension of games and of related emerging practices. Within the specific topic of this article, many research questions are still open: How does property work in the community of guilds? How does sharing money and objects work? How is the virtual property perceived by the players? The best part and the worst part of emergent social phenomena, both online and offline, is that every answer is just a bit of truth as well as the start of new questions.

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## Notes

1. The complete description of item properties in WoW can be found at <<http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/items/basics.html>>
2. Characters can only kill characters from the opposite faction, and they can do it freely only in PvP (*Player versus Player*) Servers. In normal servers or in RP (*Role Playing*) Servers, both players have to set their characters in PvP mode to be able to fight each other.
3. Obviously there are many different kinds of deviant practice in *World of Warcraft*. Many are widely recognized as deviant (e.g. *gold farming*, *ninjalooting* or *camping*), while others seem to exist in a grey area, where they are not completely accepted, but at least understood (e.g. *twinking*) (Glas 2007).
4. A guild is an in-game association of player characters. Guilds are formed to make grouping and raiding easier and more rewarding, as well as to form a social atmosphere in which to enjoy the game.

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