The Full-Time Guild Master

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Massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (or MMORPGs for short) are a genre of PC games played over the internet that involve large numbers of players occupying a large virtual environment. The genre was popularized by such titles as *EverQuest* and the more recent *World of Warcraft*. The average MMORPG player spends 22 hours online per week (Yee, 2006a). With the increasing sophistication of games and the staggering time commitment that more dedicated players must make to the game, it seems natural to conclude that the initial novelty of an unfamiliar fantasy world quickly wears off. Players demand increasingly complicated and realistic simulations of real world activities to keep themselves amused—economic ventures, teamwork, alliances, and so forth. All of these structures, in turn, demand players to run them. For example, "players in Star Wars Galaxies [may] operate a pharmaceutical manufacturing business for fun" (Yee, 2006b, p. 69).

I will focus on one specific structure—the ubiquitous player collectives that form the most basic level of organization in every MMORPG, and are alternatively referred to as "clans," "corporations," "outfits," or, most commonly, "guilds." Specifically, I will focus on the nature of the work that is necessary to run these collectives, and how this work often transcends what people conventionally regard as "play" and passes into the realm of very real and often intensely time-consuming work—what Julian Kücklich (2005) refers to in his writing on game modifications or *mods* (a form of a amateur game development) as "playbour." I will show that leadership of large player collectives constitutes "playbour" in the sense that it is unpaid work that goes beyond play and personal amusement and approaches the dynamic of real-world work. It adds real and tangible value to the game without compensation for the player, and may therefore be termed "exploited" in the same sense that Kücklich describes mods as exploited free labor. However, this also raises the question of just what the term "exploited" means in this context, and how the problem may be solved to avoid this "exploitation."

Kücklich calls mod development a form of labor because mod development produces tangible artifacts which increase the value of the host game. I propose that guild leadership may be a form of labor as well, though it does not produce artifacts that are quite as tangible. Guild

leadership often tends to resemble work more than play for the following reasons: it is not an occupation that the player can abandon at will without consequences, it contributes to the value of the product, and it actively develops and requires skills that are broadly relevant in the corporate world.

While leading a guild may on the surface seem like an extension of ordinary game play, perhaps appropriate to more dedicated players who have more time to spend on the game, a closer examination quickly reveals that this activity often has little in common with "play" as it is conventionally perceived. This is true not just with regard to the activity itself, but also with regard to the motivations behind and benefits derived from it. It is generally accepted that "play" is part of "leisure"—voluntary activity performed by the individual for the purpose of relaxation and recreation. However, primary and secondary sources on guild leadership reveal that this activity is anything but relaxing. In his Daedalus Project feature *Life as a Guild Leader*, Nick Yee (2006c) surveyed 280 guild leaders ("GLs" or "GMs") about their experiences. Many GMs equated their position to a job, often with the implication that it was not work they were being adequately compensated for: "Being a guild leader is like being a manager at work, only without the paycheck" (2006c, p. 9). In his analysis of the responses, Yee concludes that "many respondents described their game-play as an obligation," and that for many of them, "there simply was no longer time for 'play' in the game" (2006c, p. 8).

In addition to Yee's survey, I collected evidence for this phenomenon on the official forum for the popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. One particular forum thread was particularly poignant: a GM, posting under the alias of Dynamic, described his experiences leading a guild in three long posts entitled "Point me to the GM support group?" (2008). He begins by saying that "I used to be one of the most patient of leaders," but that "lately..... Im starting to lose it. … I lose sleep at night. Im frustrated, stressed and to be honest, Im not very nice any more. And I am certainly not patient" (section 0, para. 4). The causes of his problems are typical of work-related stress: he complains about irresponsible fellow players, such as those who are late for "raids" and thereby cause "the people who were on time and ready … !%%*@ing and moaning about not starting on time" (section 0, para. 8). He complains about internal guild politics (not an uncommon phenomenon) and how they focus around his position, such as how when "someone /licks me it shoots through the [grapevine] 'Whats going on between GM+person?'" (section 2, para. 2). He also bemoans the long hours he is forced to dedicate to the game, saying that "after most raids, people come to me with comments," and "the ##%% keeps me up until like 2am every night" (section 1, para. 15). In his concluding remarks, he describes the obligation he feels to continue at his work despite the difficulties: "I love my guild. And most the people in it … They are the reason I am still here … I dont wanna let them down or hurt them. I dont wanna quit or sell them out. I dont wanna say bye to my

friends" (section 3, para. 6), but he also repeats that his position in the game is causing him serious real-world stress: "Im exhausted. Im late for work a lot. Im tired. I have a 24-7 headache" (section 3, para. 8). The 16 responses, collected two days after the initial post was made, almost unanimously echo a sentiment of sympathy and shared understanding. Scattered among the helpful advice are numerous comments from other GMs, such as "I COMPLETELY understand what you're saying," (section 17, para. 2) and "You have described so perfectly what I call the GM syndrome" (section 11, para. 1).

If guild leadership is an activity that is motivated by a sense of obligation rather than a desire for entertainment, it can hardly be called "play" in the conventional sense. However, to be termed "work," it seems reasonable to require that it also produce some meaningful "good." This good is quite simple: it is the organized structure that lies at the heart of modern MMORPGs. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, valuable items are available from "instances," which can only be successfully traversed in groups of multiple, often dozens, of players. The need for inter-player organization that is so fundamentally built into today's most successful MMORPG indicates that most players consider organized play to be vital to the massively-multiplayer experience, and this sort of organized play is almost impossible without centralized leadership. The desire for organized play may also be explained by the fact that the appeal of MMORPGs to many players is precisely their social aspect (Yee, 2007), which would not be nearly so meaningful without established social "clubs" in the form of guilds. Modern MMORPGs do not provide players with the organizational labor necessary to maintain these social structures, and therefore require players to take on the role of guild master in order to maintain such large organizational structures on a long-term basis. Therefore, the "good" that GMs contribute to the games they play is in fact very important to the players' experiences, and by extension to the success of the game itself.

It is then clear that the activities of guild leaders are strenuous and not entirely voluntary—certainly not in the sense that "leisure" is voluntary. They also produce a real and tangible good for other players and ,by extension, the game developer and publisher. However, perhaps an even more authoritative reason for classifying guild leadership as work comes from the corporate world, which is coming to recognize the very real management skills that guild leadership requires. In April 2006, John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas published an article in *Wired* magazine which, among other things, stated that "the process of becoming an effective *World of Warcraft* guild master amounts to a total-immersion course in leadership" (Brown & Thomas, 2006, para. 4). In 2008, IBM commissioned a study by the consulting company Seriosity into the potential of massively multiplayer games for developing leadership skills. In an interview, the company's co-founder Byron Reeves explained some of the reasons why leadership experience in *World of Warcraft* is particularly relevant for the corporate world: "There's a lot of opportunity

to try things a lot of times, and there's value in that: A lot of small failures add up to global success rather than being so careful about each step" (Melymuka, 2008, p. 2).

The fact that IBM would commission a study on the value of MMORPG leadership is an indicator of the growing recognition for the legitimacy of guild leadership as "work." Ordinary leisure is rarely able to impart on participants the same sort of leadership experience, because leisure by nature implies a lack of responsibility—that is part of what makes leisure so liberating. Leadership, on the other hand, is the very embodiment of responsibility, both for oneself and for the group. Yee's survey of guild leaders also suggests that it is precisely this responsibility that keeps them in their positions (2006c). Since it is clear that this sort of activity cannot possibly be termed "play" or "leisure," it must be called "work"—or, as Kücklich puts it, "playbour"—though it is distinct from Kücklich's playbour in the sense that it does not produce a material good, but rather provides the immaterial good (what may be considered a service) of maintaining the player organizations that are so critical to the success of massively multiplayer games (2005).

Having established guild leadership as a form of free labor, one must determine to what degree it is "exploited" labor. Kücklich (2005) argues that mod development is exploited on the basis that "the creators of the produced goods do not 'own' their products" and that the mod developers' "leisure is being commodified by the games industry." Guild leadership may be called "exploited" for similar, though distinct reasons. The important distinction to establish is the difference in *intent*—while mod developers intend to create a product that will be enjoyed by owners of the game in question, and thereby benefit the game publishers by increasing the value of their game, guild masters generally do not *intend* to explicitly make the game more fun for fellow guild members. In general, the metric that determines the "quality" of a guild leader is the success of their guild and its members in the game world—how well they play the game. This is evident from public discussion on the *World of Warcraft* forums—many of the responses to the previously mentioned stressed GM took the form of highly technical advice for maximizing the efficiency of the guild, such as "Start invites 30 minutes before you plan on doing the first pull … they have to be ready, prepared and in the instance at X time" (Dynamic, 2008, section 9, para. 2). While this distinction may seem a subtle one, it leads into another, more sinister reason to consider such activities not just a form of labor, but a particularly exploited, *involuntary* form of labor.

Since the intent of a guild leader is to better play the game, he or she is influenced by the same factors as those that influence ordinary game players. In particular, the immediate reward system in games conditions players to "work harder, faster, and more efficiently," on the basis of operant conditioning (Yee, 2006a, p. 70). Since guild masters begin as players, they must become accustomed to the game's reward system. A MMORPG player quoted by Yee states that "it goes from enjoyable to

work so gradually that unless you step back for a while and evaluate you do not even realize you're working" (p. 70). The activity of guild leadership takes the addictive ingredient in games and combines it with obligation and responsibility. Many of the guild masters surveyed by Yee (2006c) in his "Life as a Guild Leader" study, like the GM whose forum post I analyzed above, also indicated that they continued their work out of a sense of responsibility: "The toughest thing for me, about leading a guild was just showing up. I never wanted the job, but I felt obligated to maintain the guild I loved" (p. 8). Of course, continuing to play a game out of a sense of responsibility or because of the immediate rewards does not necessarily imply that the participant is no longer enjoying himself. The issue is that, unlike simply playing the game, which is carefully designed to be fun and relaxing, guild leadership itself generally involves more interaction with other players, which tends to be difficult and stressful, than playing. However, the guild leader is obliged to continue with the "game" due to the reward mechanism and the obligation he and she feels to fellow players. That is not to say that guild masters never quit their positions, but rather that they do not necessarily get the choice of where and when to hold them (whether they enjoy it or not)—certainly not in the same sense that a casual player has a choice to play or not play whenever he or she wants. This paints a truly sinister picture of the work of guild leadership: the guild leader suddenly becomes not just a laborer working for free for the benefit of the game publisher, but a laborer who is psychologically bound to continue his labor, whether aware or not that his or her activities are no longer truly "leisure."

This situation puts guild leaders into an even more "precarious" position than Kücklich's mod developers. While the mod developer is fully aware that his work is distinct from the leisurely activity of playing the game, the guild leader may be unaware of the distinction (as described by the player quoted above). The guild leader is also not as free to stop the activity if he or she feels it is no longer enjoyable. While mod development may sometimes involve a sense of obligation to a community or mod team, guild leadership *always* involves an obligation to fellow players and adds to it the subtle operant conditioning built into the reward system of modern games. Further paralleling Kücklich's description of mod developers, guild leaders form a "dispersed multitude" that holds considerable sway over the player base. Since many active players belong to a guild or other organization, they are often in contact with a guild leader or other type of player who is "working" within the game in a position of responsibility. Even more than mod developers, guild leaders are generally unaware of this fact. The common perception among guild leaders is that they are still playing the game, rather than rendering a service. This is evident from the language used by Yee's (2006c) respondents when describing their role: some say that the responsibility "takes all the fun out of the *game*," (emphasis mine) or that "you have to log on … even if you are not really in the mood to *play the game*" (p. 2).

Therefore, guild leaders are unaware of both the free labor they are providing for the game publisher and the power they hold over the player community, and must therefore be just as vulnerable to "exploitation" as Kücklich's mod developers, if not more so.

Simply calling guild leadership a form of exploited free labor is, however, problematic and unhelpful. It seems unlikely that game developers explicitly seek to trap guild leaders into positions of responsibility from which they cannot escape, and the term "exploited" may carry an undue malicious connotation. Even more so than with modifications, we are forced to ask: "are the game companies exploiting the gamers, or are the gamers exploiting themselves?" Perhaps the important lesson to draw from this exploration is not that game companies are deriving profits from the exploitation of a small number of particularly dedicated players, but that the structure of these games demands that some players sacrifice their own enjoyment for the benefit of others. A key appeal of massively-multiplayer games is that they are, in fact, massive, and therefore allow players to organize into large groups. However, this organizational element exposes the guild leader to an interactive element that is not mediated by the carefully designed structure of the game—namely, the need to closely interact with large groups of people. A more focused approach to designing the social aspect of a game could allow for environments to be developed that would lend themselves to less centralized, and therefore less personally taxing, forms of leadership.

Of course, as long as the organizational labor is done by players (whether one player or many), it still constitutes free, "exploited" labor. Taken to the extreme, one might claim that the average player is also being exploited, because the game is maintained by the presence of numerous players who populate the virtual world, and thereby add value to the game. However, it seems clear that this claim is a little absurd, because the average player plays the game for leisure, derives enjoyment, and stops playing when he is no longer interested. One way to look at this situation is that the player adds some value to the game, but gets back a greater value. This difference is paid to the game company in the form of purchase and subscription fees, and is determined by market forces as the price the player is willing to pay to freely enjoy the game experience. The same cannot be said about guild leadership because of the coercive factor involved in the position. Therefore, a game that is designed with the goal of alleviating the pressures of leadership could allow for the restoration of this balance for the more dedicated players, resulting in a better experience for everyone.

The mantra of commercial game development seems to be "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." No doubt this mantra applies to social structures as much as anything else, and remedying the situation of exploited GMs has no reason to be a priority in the minds of developers and publishers unless it has an impact on the success of the game. However, I would argue that reducing the number of "over-stressed" players in the game could, in fact,

be beneficial for the game's success. A common stigma associated with playing massively-multiplayer games is the stereotype of the player who is overly concerned with in-game matters at the expense of "real life." Excessive concern with in-game matters naturally accompanies the sense of responsibility and obligation associated with guild leadership, and so these over-stressed players contribute to the unsavory stereotype that keeps such games from having a greater mainstream appeal. *World of Warcraft* made great headway into the mainstream market, and it may be argued that better support for casual players (with features like level caps putting less emphasis on excessive play experience) is responsible for this. However, even *World of Warcraft* suffers from the stigma of the "overinvested" stereotype, and the stressed, exploited guild leader is one of the causes.

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