If you Guild it, They Will Come: Organizational Leadership in Games

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ABSTRACT
Stephen Gillett’s story has become famous: without any relevant educational background, and after years of wasting his time on World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004), he got a job at Yahoo. Why? Gillett’s CV showed that his experience being a guild leader in the game taught him all the relevant skills: human resource management, logistics, leadership. Indeed, Gillett went on to work as Chief Information Officer at Starbucks, then as Executive Vice-President at Semantec, then at Google.

Following stories such as Gillett’s, and ever since the rise and popularity of World of Warcraft in 2004, video games have been credited with creating the “next generation of CEOs” (Beck & Wade, 2004; cf. Reeves, Malone & Driscoll, 2008; Ee & Cho, 2012). Indeed, the past 15 years have seen publications in business and management literature touting the potential for games to teach young people how to lead and organize large groups of people. But when (if at all) they actually do so, how does that even work? In other words, what kind of organizations do they set up, how do these come to exist and who is elevated to the status of leader? In other words, which players get to become Stephen Gillett, when others are just playing a game?

Unfortunately, previous literature approaches the phenomenon deductively from one of two reductionist perspectives: as either neo-liberal theorization regarding the economic virtues of using games for leadership education (Beck & Wade, 2004; Ee & Cho, 2012); or instead revelling in neo-marxist condemnations of these games as corporate training machines and as vehicles for capitalist ideology (Rettberg, 2008). Such previous scholarship has insufficiently engaged with the phenomenon of leadership in video games
empirically, on the basis of more than anecdotal evidence, content analyses and occasional auto-ethnography.

Lastly, the literature overwhelmingly looks at just one case, that of World of Warcraft. This introduces a number of problems. Including, firstly, an exaggeration of the importance of one game, which draws less than 4 million players per month within one of the biggest cultural industries of the 21st century. Compared to other titles, e.g., League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009), which draws in 27 million players each day, World of Warcraft is methodologically an illegitimate focus for such singular study. Secondly, by looking at only one game, the specificities between games are eliminated—much like comparing chess to football or choreography—and should not be used to generalized one case (that of 4 million players) to the entirety of video game consumption, which counts about 2.2 billion people across races, ages and genders, in an industry that surpasses even film in revenue (ESA, 2017; Newzoo, 2017). Instead, the enthusiastic literature on leadership in games takes small, unempirically grounded cases to generalize its claims to the entirety of “games” (Reeves & Malone, 2008; Scholz, 2010) or even the “gamer generation” (Beck & Wade, 2004; 2006).

By contrast, this paper contributes to the literature by looking empirically at: which players find themselves in leadership positions in different games? How do they become leaders? And what kinds of organizations do they set up in order to run their organizations? In other words, this paper looks beyond the unempirical and singular monolithic research on World of Warcraft leadership, and does so inductively, on the basis of interviews with N=64 ‘guild,’ team or ‘clan’ leaders of four games. That is, the popular games Counter-Strike [CS], League of Legends [LoL], Guild Wars 2 [GW] and the long-running MMORPG RuneScape [RS] (Valve, 2000; ArenaNet, 2012; Jagex, 2001).

Without a background in management education and without work experience as a manager in business, these leaders manage guilds, teams and other groups (or ‘Online Gaming Organizations’ [OGOs]) on the amateur or professional level, in OGOs numbering from five to several hundreds of members in size.

Data more specifically consists of N=64 OGO-leaders of the four games (N=15 CS, N=17 LoL, N=16 GW and N=16 RS leaders), of which 25 are now in offline management positions and 14 of which participated at one point in professional ‘esports’ teams as player or coach. On the basis thereon, the paper produces three ideal-typical organizational structures based on different stages and sizes of OGOs.

The paper concludes that the organizational structures that emerge are at first ephemeral, gendered and charisma-based. Secondly, the ‘start-up’ stage draws on the traditional authority of a small group of established, original leaders making top-down decisions. Thirdly, bigger and long-standing guilds move into a corporate phase, which guild leaders describe as initially akin to parenting, developing into elaborate systems of bureaucracy and democratic decision-making.

In all, the paper sheds light on the emergence of ‘serious’ leadership in a playful setting, in which players freely come to adopt professional business management styles.
OPTIONAL BIO

Lars de Wildt is a lecturer and PhD-candidate working with Stef Aupers at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He is interested in how cultural backgrounds affect play. His research currently focuses on the ways in which videogame players and developers play with religion in a supposedly secular age. Side projects involve games and cultural capital, leadership and quantum physics. Lars has been a Visiting Scholar at Deakin University with Tom Apperley in Melbourne, is a board member for Press Start Journal and chairman of DiGRA Flanders. Lars has published with Brill, Routledge, ACM and others.


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