

# From 'Training Grounds' to Sociotechnical Actors: Do MMORPG's *Presage/Prestage* the Futures of Leadership and Work?

**Kurt Thumlert**

York University  
Faculty of Education  
Toronto, Ontario Canada  
[kthumlert@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:kthumlert@edu.yorku.ca)

**Suzanne de Castell**

University of Ontario Institute of Technology  
Faculty of Education  
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada  
[suzanne.decastell@uoit.ca](mailto:suzanne.decastell@uoit.ca)

**Jennifer Jenson**

York University  
Faculty of Education  
Toronto, Ontario Canada  
[jjenson@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:jjenson@edu.yorku.ca)

## ABSTRACT

Historically, researchers have positioned MMORPGs as “training grounds” for leadership competences. This conceptual paper takes as its point of departure a *reversal* of contemporary literature on the transferability of leadership skills purportedly learned in MMORPGs to articulate new questions about how these games do not so much “mirror” organizational contexts or serve as learning grounds for leadership competences, but have in fact participated in the very shaping of leadership models in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We undertake an analysis of *World of Warcraft* as a paradigmatic MMORPG to explore the following questions: To what extent do MMORPGs co-articulate or *prestige* the new cultural/organizational forms that they purportedly provide the “training grounds” for? And – *if the game is the message* - how might MMORPGs exert agency not just upon new leadership models, but also upon emerging modes of production - from new modes of knowledge creation to emerging forms of affective labour in globalized economies?

## Keywords

MMORPGs; leadership; simulations and learning;

## INTRODUCTION

This conceptual paper takes as its point of departure a *reversal* of contemporary literature on the transferability of leadership skills purportedly learned in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) to articulate new questions about how these pervasive game worlds do not so much “mirror” organizational contexts or serve as experiential learning grounds for leadership competences, but have in fact

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2018

© 2018 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

participate in the very shaping of leadership models in 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations and business worlds. This situates MMORPGs not as virtual sites that incidentally prepare people for “transferrable” leadership practices or induct them into parallel leadership dispositions and roles in worlds “outside” of games, but reconceives MMORPGs as sociotechnical systems that are shaped by, and interactively (re)shape or (re)assemble, the very meanings and values and forms of “leadership” and “work” within the networked/virtual environments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **New Leadership Models: Distributed, Networked, Virtual**

As many theorist have noted, the command-and-control models of leadership characterizing 20th century organizations are shifting towards open, heterarchical, and “distributed” leadership models (Ancona & Backman, 2017; Thumlert et al, 2018; Peters & Araya, 2010) – models that encourage mobile, self-organizing, collaborative, and decentralized leadership assemblages, as well as promote the agentive dispositions necessary for actors within organizations to “lead from the middle” (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2017). Here, recent leadership models invite key actors to share responsibility with others in taking risks, innovating and inventing, and co-shaping professional cultures and organizational structures, while also involving multiple actors/communities in co-designing goals, strategies and processes – enterprise processes and structures that may themselves be modular, “flattened”, in flux, or coordinated by dynamic communities of practice under uncertain and turbulent conditions (Ancona et al. 2007; Thumlert et al. 2018). Moreover, new leadership models suggest that leadership itself is increasingly enacted (just like MMO’s) within the virtual spaces of networks and networked “creative economies” (Ancona & Backman, 2017; Authors redacted, 2018; Peters & Araya, 2010).

Historically, games researchers have often understood and positioned MMORPG’s as possible “training grounds” for the modern leader. John Seely Brown & Douglas Thomas (2006) famously recognized *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) as an ideal simulator for training the leaders of tomorrow, suggesting that *WoW* was “a total immersion course in leadership”. Since then, much research and literature has focused primarily on the “transfer of training” question: if, how and to what extent do MMORPGs provide experiential or procedural models for acquiring leadership dispositions and competences, where “skills” learned in games (interpersonal, communicational, conflict negotiation, recruitment/retention, motivating, incentivizing, directing) might be translated or transferred over into organizational and business contexts (Ee & Cho, 2012; Contractor et al. 2012; Lisk et al. 2012; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2012; Reeves et al. 2008; Xanthopoulou & Papagiannidis, 2012; Yee, 2006). In this body of research, it is suggested that leadership in games can or does translate to, or is co-mappable with, other practical domains and “real world” settings (Rubefire, 2014).

At the same time, in much of this research, leadership models and theories remain undertheorized and rely often upon traditional discourses and categories of fixed means-ends goals, individual “interpersonal” skills, and stable team-building, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century managerial traits theory and psychology frameworks. Here, even recent business simulators/serious games explicitly designed to “teach” leadership have been critiqued for their failure to: 1) articulate a theory of leadership, 2) articulate a theory of leadership adequate to changing contexts, or 3) instantiate, within the simulation or serious game, the very theory or model it presumes to “teach” (Lopes et al. 2013). At the same time, MMORPGs have been, and remain, ahead of their time, as it were, in modelling or anticipating contemporary leadership models that are increasingly game-like – heterarchical, distributed, driven by teams instead of individuals, self-organizing,

and networked, with a likelihood of transient membership and liminal organizational boundaries.

### **Beyond Mirrors & Crystal Balls: Reading Games as “Actors”**

While Reeves et al. (2008) have signaled that MMORPG’s “mirror” 21<sup>st</sup> century business contexts and, further, may even “foreshadow” trends for future of business leadership, this work was more concerned with exploring present opportunities of MMORPG’s as online “labs” for experiential learning and leadership training. Still, asking if, or arguing that games are good simulators or training grounds for leadership occults the more interesting question of if, how and to what extent MMORG’s participate in anticipating, articulating and co-defining the organizational architectures, structures, processes, values, and modes of production (of tomorrow). Just as significantly, if business leadership forms are “foreshadowed” by or within MMORPGs, to what extent do games themselves *lead the way*, that is, have agency and/or co-generate possible (game-like) futures? This paper explores the extent to which games (and the various cultural sites built alongside them) go beyond simply presaging leadership models to actively staging emergent forms of leadership, working life, and modes of production, as well as, perhaps, the forms and values of everyday “tactical” life within the complex sociotechnical systems and algorithmic networks we increasingly inhabit.

### **Looking to Games to Lead: The Game is the Message**

By shifting our gaze from looking at MMORPGs as systems that mirror, model, teach or train, we can focus instead on how they may anticipate emerging organizational forms in neoliberal contexts (systems which are, arguably, becoming increasingly game-like). From there, we begin to critically read—and more purposefully “re-write” – MMORPGs not simply as possible bellwethers for tomorrow’s leadership styles (Reeves et al. 2008; Wolfenstein, 2013), but more productively as sociotechnical sites that actively re/shape emerging leadership models and forms of work (affective, precarious, or otherwise) and our understanding of “individual” agency, as well as the organizational systems – virtual and networked – in which worlds are assembled or assemble themselves (Latour, 2005). Finally, *the game being the message*, we consider the importance of designing games with more critical models and values for life, labour, play, conviviality - and leadership.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Ancona, D. and Backman, E. 2017. *Distributed Leadership from Pyramids to Networks: The Changing Leadership Landscape*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Leadership Centre.
- Ancona, D., Malone, T. W., Orlikowski, W. J., and Senge, P. M. 2007. “In Praise of the Incomplete Leader.” *Harvard Business Review*, 85, (2), 92-100
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2004. *World of Warcraft*. Online Game. Blizzard Entertainment.
- Brown, J.S. and Thomas, D. 2006. “You Play World of Warcraft? Your Hired!” *Wired*, 14, (4).
- Contractor, N.S., DeChurch, L.A., Carson, J., Carter, D.R., and Keegan, B. 2012. “The Topology of Collective Leadership.” *Leadership Quarterly*, 23, (6), 994-1011.
- Ee, A. and Cho, H. 2012. “What Makes an MMORPG Leader? A Social Cognitive Theory-based Approach to Understanding the Formation of Leadership Capabilities in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 6, (1), 25-37.

- Hargreaves, A. and Ainscow, M. 2015. "The Top and Bottom of Leadership and Change." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 97, (3) 42-48.
- Hargreaves, A. and O'Connor, M.T. 2017. "Cultures of Professional Collaboration: Their Origins and Opponents." *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 2, (2), 74-85.
- Latour, B. 2005, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Lisk, T.C., Kaplancali, U.T., and Riggio, R. E. 2012. "Leadership in Multiplayer Online Gaming Environments." *Simulation and Gaming*, 43, (1), 133-149.
- Lopes, M.C., Fialho, F.A.P., Cunha C.J.C.A., and Niveiros, S.I. 2013. "Business Games for Leadership Development: A Systematic Review", *Simulation & Gaming*. 44, (4), 523-543.
- Mysirlaki S. and Paraskeva F. 2012. "Leadership in MMOGs: A Field of Research on Virtual Teams." *Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 10, (2), 223 – 234.
- Peters, M.A. and Araya, D. 2010. "The creative economy: origins, categories, and concepts." In *Education in the Creative Economy: Knowledge and Learning in the Age of Innovation* edited by D. Araya and M.A. Peters, 13-30. New York NY, USA: Peter Lang.
- Reeves, B., Malone, T.W. and O'Driscoll, T. 2008. "Leadership's Online Labs." *Harvard Business Review*. 86, (5), 58–66.
- Rubenfire, A. 2014. "Can 'World of Warcraft' Game Skills Help Land a Job?" *Wall Street Journal*. Online at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/can-warcraft-game-skills-help-land-a-job-1407885660>.
- Thumlert, K., Owston, R. & Malhotra. 2018. "Transforming school culture through inquiry-driven learning and iPads", *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 3, (2), 79-96.
- Wolfenstein, M. 2013. "Digital Structures and the Future of Online Leadership." In *Immersive Environments, Augmented Realities, and Virtual Worlds: Assessing Future Trends in Education* edited by S. D'Agustino, 257-280. Hershey, PA, USA: Information Science Reference.
- Xanthopoulou, D. and Papagiannidis, S. 2012. "Play Online, Work Better? Examining the Spillover of Active Learning and Transformational Leadership." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 79 (7), 1328-1339.
- Yee, N. 2006. "The Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively-Multiuser Online Graphical Environments." *PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15, 309-329.