

War in Synthetic Worlds

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Abstract. Most online games let players fight each other, but this fighting does not constitute war. This article explains why it is not war, how games can be designed for war, and how online games can be useful for the academic study of war.

Introduction

Massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) are not just games, but constitute true human societies with functioning economies. [1] Social and economic factors, history tells us, can lead to war. Taking into account that computer games have always been war-heavy, and looking at the titles of some MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* or *Guild Wars*, one would expect war to be a defining feature of synthetic worlds. This paper explains why most MMORPGs do not allow for true war (despite all the fighting), and offers solutions to how a game can be designed to facilitate war between its players. True war is not meant as a more *realistic* war experience, but as war being a political act. Having established how an MMORPG could simulate true war, this paper explains how such a game could be used by scholars of political theory to understand the causes and dynamics of war.

Serious Play

“How can games help studying real war?” one might ask. *Immersion* is the key, as it makes people react to the game as if it were real. In his defining work *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga explains that 'play can be profoundly serious. The player can abandon himself body and soul to the game, and the consciousness of its being “merely” a game can be thrust into the background.' [2] Thus, the player forgets that he is merely playing and reacts to the game as if it were totally serious.

Especially MMORPGs are played very seriously: In a survey of online players, 20 percent reported their online world to be their true home [1]. The player eventually identifies with his avatar (his in-game character), which can be understood as a virtual prosthesis that is equally part of the person as a material prosthesis is. [1]

Thus, the avatar interacts with the world in the same way the player would if he were there. MMORPG societies also have a normative function, forcing players to take the world seriously, just as real-world societies force their members not to question the society *per se*. Players thus behave in games similarly to how they would if they were in these worlds themselves. They have personal interests, emotional attachments, friends, foes, property, and desires. MMORPGs are true societies, and thus theories of war must be equally valid in the virtual world as in the real world.

On War: Online and Offline

Before discussing why there is no war in most MMORPGs, we need to examine how and why players fight each other in player versus player (PvP) combat online. In most games, PvP combat is conducted in an arena-like environment. Players usually participate to experience the thrill of fighting intelligent opponents, and to gain reputation (often exemplified in honour points). In *World of Warcraft*, successful PvP players earn special clothing and are awarded titles that appear in their name, announcing their fighting skills to all other players. In short: bragging rights. *Guild Wars* and *Dark Age of Camelot* on the other hand reward PvP victories with positive effects on other players. None of these types of combat involve *rational* player interests and thus do not classify as war.

War, as defined by Carl von Clausewitz, is the continuation of politics by other means. Thus, war is a political act. His theory of trinitarian warfare posits that war is a mixture of reason (politics), passion (the people), and chance (actual fighting). [4] Thus, war is an act caused by both reasoning and passion, and the conduct of war is greatly determined by chance. Similarly, Thomas Hobbes lists competition, diffidence, and glory as reasons to go to war: 'The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation.' [5] Both definitions illustrate why MMORPG combat is not war. By Clausewitz's definition, games lack the political dimension, the rational reason to go to war. Taking Hobbes' definition, players only fight for reputation, not for safety or material gains.

Now that we have defined what war is and what is lacking from MMORPGs, we need to look at the causes of wars. As we are dealing with worlds that lack clear political authority, we should look at theories on the causes of civil wars. Civil wars are thought to be caused by economic factors ("greed and grievances") [6], cultural history ("ancient hatreds") [7], misinformation and mutual fears ("security dilemma") [8], and bad leaders [9].

Castronova proved that synthetic worlds are economies just like our own, thus we can examine how MMORPG economies can trigger war [10]. Even though there is culture in MMORPGs, there is usually one player culture (not competing ones with an antagonistic history), and therefore it is difficult to apply the ancient hatreds theory. Misinformation, mutual expectations, and bad leaders are inherent to human society, and may therefore also play an important role. Taking this into account, let us now examine how we can design synthetic worlds to facilitate war.

Designing War

Now let us see how we can make true wars happen while keeping the fantastical and fun elements of MMORPGS. For war to start, there needs to be a cause. In general, the causes of war can be reduced to: security fears, economic gains, cognitive failure, and bad leaders. While bad leaders require player government (a topic that this short paper cannot discuss), the other three reasons are easily implemented in MMORPGs.

Most games currently have restrictions on who can attack whom and in which area (usually in arenas), because otherwise stronger players will randomly kill new, weak players for fun, which scares off new players. [1]

If players are secure from attacks, they see no need to fight to improve their security situation. Thus, we need to enable full PvP (anyone can attack anyone, anywhere) without endangering new players. *EVE Online*¹ has developed a useful setup: New players start out in AI-patrolled zones that protect them from rogue players. Advanced players join player-controlled alliances, which control solar systems, own space stations, levy taxes, and offer protection in their territories. These alliances levy taxes and provide services, just as a Hobbesian state should.

Having secured new players in such a way, factions need a reason to attack their neighbours. The most obvious reason could be economic security fears. In most MMORPGs, players earn experience and money by killing monsters in PvE (player versus encounter) combat and by completing quests. If the main source of income is killing the AI, why would players feel their security is threatened by other players?

The crafting system that exists in most games may be the solution: Certain resources are needed to create certain items, which are very useful to the players. If items deplete or constantly require new resources, and the resources are rare, can only be mined by one faction at a time, and are always located in borderlands, then factions may go to war over these resources. This way, we create a security dilemma: Any step to improve one faction's security threatens the other factions' security. [8]

We also need to make sure factions are unsure about the strength of their opponents, what resources they have, and where they mine them. This can be achieved by AI patrols that keep enemies out of their territory. It is important, though, that death in enemy territory incurs a stronger penalty than simply resurrecting at low costs, as otherwise players would simply try until they succeed, not caring about deaths. A short-time prison system could be appropriate.

All of these design changes would help cause war in virtual worlds, as they simulate the historical real-world causes of war. Why would we want to simulate war, though?

Studying War

As we have seen above, the reasons why people go to war continue to perplex academics. If two scenarios exhibit similar features, why does one result in war and

¹ *EVE Online* is an exception in many respects, as political wars do happen in this game.

the other does not? Some theories state that economic factors are key, others blame religion, others again blame bad leaders. While all theories are reasonable, none of them is fully convincing.

This is where synthetic worlds come in. Until now 'it has not been possible to observe whole societies under controlled conditions.' [11] MMORPGs are divided into many servers called shards, each handling a fraction of the user base, and each simulating the same world. As players in virtual worlds create differing dynamics on different shards, the same scenario is played maybe 100 times, each time with a slightly different outcome. [11] The researcher can then modify the variables such as resource distribution, balance of power, or economy. This way, one can statistically study the importance of various causes of war, by modifying them and letting real people play the scenario in a virtual society. The differences have to be slight to yield meaningful results – it has to remain essentially the same scenario. Now we can study 100 scenarios of Europe in 1914, each with slight modifications, and see which one leads to war and which one does not – an unprecedented tool for the war researcher. MMORPGs can put political theories to their ultimate test.

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