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## You Play World of Warcraft? You're Hired!

Why multiplayer games may be the best kind of job training.

By John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas

In late 2004, Stephen Gillett was in the running for a choice job at Yahoo! - a senior management position in engineering. He was a strong contender. Gillett had been responsible for CNET's backend, and he had helped launch a number of successful startups. But he had an additional qualification his prospective employer wasn't aware of, one that gave him a decisive edge: He was one of the top guild masters in the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*.

Gaming tends to be regarded as a harmless diversion at best, a vile corruptor of youth at worst. But the usual critiques fail to recognize its potential for experiential learning. Unlike education acquired through textbooks, lectures, and classroom instruction, what takes place in massively multiplayer online games is what we call accidental learning. It's *learning to be* - a natural byproduct of adjusting to a new culture - as opposed to *learning about*. Where traditional learning is based on the execution of carefully graded challenges, accidental learning relies on failure. Virtual environments are safe platforms for trial and error. The chance of failure is high, but the cost is low and the lessons learned are immediate.

Simulation games have proven excellent tools for training people in manual skills; for example, *X-Plane*, a flight simulator that runs on home computers, has been certified by the Federal Aviation Administration. But accidental learning transcends intentional training. When role-playing gamers team up to undertake a quest, they often need to attempt particularly difficult challenges repeatedly until they find a blend of skills, talents, and actions that allows them to succeed. This process brings about a profound shift in how they

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perceive and react to the world around them. They become more flexible in their thinking and more sensitive to social cues. The fact that they don't think of gameplay as training is crucial. Once the experience is explicitly educational, it becomes about developing compartmentalized skills and loses its power to permeate the player's behavior patterns and worldview.

In this way, the process of becoming an effective *World of Warcraft* guild master amounts to a total-immersion course in leadership. A guild is a collection of players who come together to share knowledge, resources, and manpower. To run a large one, a guild master must be adept at many skills: attracting, evaluating, and recruiting new members; creating apprenticeship programs; orchestrating group strategy; and adjudicating disputes. Guilds routinely splinter over petty squabbles and other basic failures of management; the master must resolve them without losing valuable members, who can easily quit and join a rival guild. Never mind the virtual surroundings; these conditions provide real-world training a manager can apply directly in the workplace.

And that's exactly what Gillett is doing. He accepted Yahoo!'s offer and now works there as senior director of engineering operations. "I used to worry about not having what I needed to get a job done," he says. "Now I think of it like a quest; by being willing to improvise, I can usually find the people and resources I need to accomplish the task." His story - translating experience in the virtual world into success in the real one - is bound to become more common as the gaming audience explodes and gameplay becomes more sophisticated. The day may not be far off when companies receive résumés that include a line reading "level 60 tauren shaman in *World of Warcraft*."

The savviest employers will get the message.

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