How to cope when you lose access to a digital world you love

February 15 2023, by Mark Coulson

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US games developer Blizzard Activision has [become embroiled](#) in

worldwide litigation relating to its proposed acquisition by Microsoft. It has also fallen out with its Chinese distributor NetEase. This might sound like news for the business pages only. But it has had tangible, real-world consequences.

The developer's flagship product is World of Warcraft, one of the most successful massively multiplayer online (MMO) games of all time. Across the globe, over 125 million players are estimated to have, at one time or other, come to call the land of Azeroth—the setting of the game —a home of sorts. As of late January 2023, however, the estimated three million people who play the game in China have lost all access to it.

Efforts are underway to restore access to the game for its Chinese fans.

Being shut out of a virtual universe is not the same as physical eviction or forced migration. So, for some, this may seem a trivial event. To paraphrase Boris Becker, "we lost a game, not a war. Nobody died." But when we enter a digital world, particularly a perpetual MMO, like World of Warcraft, which continues to exist when we disconnect, we are effectively migrating. Losing that world—one that has become a home—has immediate and important psychological effects.

The porous membrane

The migration between the physical and the virtual realms is usually relatively brief and easy to reverse. It involves crossing what virtual economies scholar Edward Castronova calls a "porous membrane," which refers to a partial barrier between the physical and the virtual. Some things can cross in both directions (memories, values, attitudes, currency). Others (physical objects and characteristics in one direction, pet dragons and magical swords in the other) are blocked.

As players, we shift between the avatar we become in the virtual world

and the person we are in [everyday life](#). Research shows that people [often choose](#) avatars that are idealized versions of themselves (leaner, prettier, more muscular). We are not characters in these worlds but projections of our selves. The experiences we have and the actions we take are very much our own. Consequently our virtual life is likely to affect our physical life, on the other side of the membrane.

Digital worlds are not simply places where we kill monsters and acquire loot (although that part is fun). They are spaces where we socialize, work and enjoy spending time. In 2018, I conducted [a study](#) with fellow psychologists Andrea Oskis, Jacqueline Meredith and Rebecca Gould, which looked at the attachments people form to places in the real and the digital world.

To measure attachment to places (as opposed to people), we assess four different factors: how special a place is; how it contributes to our sense of identity; the people who are associated with it; and our feelings of affection towards it. On average, the 740 adults from a variety of countries who responded to our survey reported this last factor—feelings of affection—as being [stronger for digital places](#) than for their physical homes.

Emotional investment

Even though places in gaming universes have no physical existence at all, they are capable of eliciting strong feelings. It follows that when a world, its people and places, is taken from you, the impact is significant.

Players of dying games—[and there are many](#)—have flocked to servers to celebrate the times they have spent there. One player [reacted](#) to the news that Sony was shutting down its fantasy-world Free Realms by encouraging their fellow gamers to be grateful they'd had the chance to play at all. "We still have a month," they said, "so let's spend it being

happy."

The final six minutes of Final Fantasy XIV—with a meteor called Dalamud obliterating the in-game land of Eorzea—have [gone down](link) as the "single most powerful MMO ending in gaming history." People who took part [remember it](link) as "an emotional rollercoaster" and something "very real and personal."

And on the day interstellar wargame Tabula Rasa was shut down in 2009, players were invited to join in a desperate (and doomed) battle. A swansong was composed especially for the event. The two sides (the Allied Free Sentient human force and the Bane alien force) mutually destructed. One player subsequently [described](link) the lag between their actions and what was happening on screen as "unbearable" because so many gamers had joined in.

"We made slow progress and eventually cleared out all of the enemies and captured the control point. There we danced, and cheered, and cried until the servers went dark forever."

There will be those who counter that games are just games, they are not real, and online experiences are of little importance. At the same time, though, most people recognize the deep hurt and desperation that result from cyberbullying, stalking and online crime. In other words, we all acknowledge that what happens online doesn't stay online. Why should feelings of belonging and friendship not be offered the same status as those of despair and intimidation when they happen online?

The emotional investment [players](link) express show that we have the same response to the loss of a [digital world](link) as to the loss of anything in the physical world to which we are emotionally attached. Gamers in China who are no longer able to enter Azeroth will doubtless be experiencing the [five stages of grief](link)—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and

acceptance—because these feelings are hardwired into us.

Loss of all kinds is unbearable and infuriating. We feel deep sadness. We want things we have loved to return to how they were. This is a healthy response to a negative event beyond our control. Dealing with it in relation to a virtual world is no different than in the physical world. Accept the loss, notice it and do not try and change it. Crucially, acknowledge that all things change.

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https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-cope-access-digital-world.html