

# wanted:Guild, Depicting Hardcore Gaming Culture in Virtual Reality

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we present a playable interactive documentary experience, *wanted:Guild*, about the experience of hardcore gamers. Informed by postmodern literary theory, the project uses a stereoscopic virtual-reality-based environment supported by the Oculus Rift and Razer Hydra. Using interviews with hardcore gamers and environmental elements directly from the *World of the Warcraft*, the project engages issues about the blurred boundary between reality and simulation and encourages the players to explore these subjects themselves. Our preliminary audience feedback indicates the success and potential area of improvement for the project.

## Author Keywords

Virtual and Augmented Reality Games; Game-Based Storytelling; Hardcore Gamers; Interactive Documentary; Oculus Rift

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g. HCI): Miscellaneous

## INTRODUCTION

There is a gulf in the understanding that casual and non-gamers have of hardcore gamers. Stereotypically hardcore gamers are portrayed as one dimensional, socially inept individuals whose entire lives are devoted to the games they play. *wanted:Guild*, an interactive art installation, aims to bridge this gulf through the medium of an interactive documentary within stereoscopic virtual reality via the exploration of the lives of hardcore gamers; focusing on their intertwined real and virtual lives.

Via the *Oculus Rift* we create an experience where the audience is unable to turn away from the environment in a manner representative of how hardcore gamers are unable to turn away from the game world they inhabit.

In this work in progress, we present our project *wanted:Guild*. It depicts and comments on the hyperreality experienced by

*World of Warcraft*(WoW) hardcore gamers. It is a 3D interactive narrative experience where the audience interacts with interviews about the life stories of hardcore gamers, whose public image is often derided if not dehumanized. Motivated by our own experience as members of this community, our goal is to tell stories about this marginalized group from a close distance and leave space for the audience to form their own readings and reflections of the broader social phenomenon. An interactive web version of this project can be accessed at <http://chester.net/wantedguild/>.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The world within the head mounted display creates an implicit invitation toward exploration that is due in part of MacIntyre, Bolter and Gandy's idea of aura. To MacIntyre, Bolter and Gandy aura is a concept that "describes the cultural and personal significance of a place (or object) for an individual." [2] We extend this idea of aura into the emotional content of speech and narrative. *wanted:Guild* is composed of interviews with hardcore gamers that the audience experiences over the course of their exploration within the virtual world. Regardless of the experience of the audience, whether they are a gamer or not, these interviews are framed in the context of the emotional content each interviewee lends to their narrated experiences.

*wanted:Guild* is presented as a fragmented, non-chronological experience; an idea that borrows from multicursality, a hypertext concept. In a similar manner to Joyce's *Afternoon, a story* we mix the chronological order of past, present and future. [1] Although each fragment is a coherent story, anchored through our interviews with hardcore gamers, the audience experiences *wanted:Guild* by playing an active role in connecting different fragments and creating their own reading of the project.

## EXPERIENCE DESIGN FOR WANTED:GUILD

Upon entering the virtual world the audience is confronted with a floating hand, their avatar within the world. While navigating in the world, a player can activate the audio clips (details in Narrative Design) by touching floating orbs in the air. These orbs are grouped based on the topics they address. For example, orbs about the "balance between real life and games" are placed in the living room. The player can choose whether and when they want to follow the same topic or explore others. Depending on their selection of audio nodes and the order in which they visit them, each audience member will experience a different story.

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Audio nodes are deliberately placed across the world in locations that lend a visual emphasis to their content. Using a combination of narrative content and the aura of the location the audience can find a better understanding of the speaker through visual connections.

### NARRATIVE DESIGN

*wanted:Guild* is composed of a series of interviews with ten different hardcore gamers of varied experience. These gamers were recruited by contacting a number of different guilds in *WoW*. Among those contacted were *Midwinter*, a nationally ranked hardcore raiding guild and *Alea Iacta Est*, one of the largest semi-casual guilds in *WoW*.

We interviewed these hardcore gamers in casual conversation about their experiences in *WoW*. We asked non-leading, open ended questions that encouraged them to talk about their own stories and experiences. These interviews were recorded and split into a series of non-chronological segments that were arranged by topic. Some of these topics included the positive effects of playing *WoW* to the real life issues caused by the stress of raiding.

### ENVIRONMENT DESIGN



**Figure 1.** A virtual representation of a real world environment. (above) A recreation of the *World of Warcraft* environment in *wanted:Guild* (below)

The virtual space in *wanted:Guild* is composed of two parts — one realistic looking, and the other a fantasy world of *World of Warcraft* as seen in Figure 1. The representation of the real world in *wanted:Guild* takes place within an everyday house. The house environment was chosen to represent a feeling of home and safety — presenting to audience members the idea that hardcore gamers on some level equate their lives within the game world as an extension of their home lives.

The representation of the game world uses elements directly borrowed from *World of Warcraft* with the permission of *Blizzard Entertainment*. The audience sees the game world as hardcore gamers see it — only a few steps away and coexisting with the mundane “real” world. In the same way that hardcore gamers perception of the game and reality coexist with each other.

### INTERFACE DESIGN

In order to create a feeling of physical interaction with the game world for the audience, we employ the *Razer Hydra* to let the audience move a virtual representation of their hand. Both these systems were chosen to help create an immersive experience through the course of audience interaction.

Using the *Hydra’s* motion tracking technology allows users to move their hand in real life that moves an analogous virtual representation. By using a physical anchor, the *Hydra*, which affects objects within the *Rift*, a sense of immersion is created that lends itself to a simple interface control.

### PRELIMINARY AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

*wanted:Guild* has been displayed at Drexel University’s Research Day, where students and faculty interacted with the project. Public opinion has also been solicited from the *Rift* Developer Forums. It has also been shown to *WoW* gamers. All together forty-seven people participated in testing *wanted:Guild* interaction, narrative and environmental interaction.

Based on the initial feedback collected, *wanted:Guild* succeeds in its invitation towards interaction. Once they put on the *Rift*, our audience immediately tried to explore and interact with the project. However, many expressed their desire for more interaction from *wanted:Guild* than what was currently available. The audience has also responded positively to the fragmented nature of the story. The experience, unique to each audience member, has been remarked upon as a positive feature of *wanted:Guild*.

We believe our preliminary results show that our current design choice for content and platform is reasonably successful in terms of generating interest and support initial exploration, although its limited interaction model can be largely improved towards a more nuanced interactive experience.

### CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In the *wanted:Guild* project, we explored how to use the relatively new *Oculus Rift* technology to create an interactive documentary experience. Taking the ideas of aura and place we associated hardcore gaming stories that the non-gamer might have found confusing with visual indicators. Through their interaction, we offered audience members a means by which to explore, listen, and hopefully discover the intertwined lives that hardcore gamers live within the real and the virtual. As part of our future work, we plan to show the project in different venues and further analyze the feedback we receive.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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2. MacIntyre, B., Bolter, J. D., and Gandy, M. Presence and the aura of meaningful places. *Presence Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 6, 2 (2004), 197–206.