

“Even Recovering your Corpse was Lethal”: Exploring Retrospective Lived Experiences of the Corrupted Blood Virtual Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 research related to the psychological effects of computer use for social interaction has grown (Barreda-Ángeles and Hartmann 2022; Paul, Mohanty, and Sengupta 2022). In gaming, this includes the prominence of video gaming and esports (e.g., López-Cabarcos, Ribeiro-Soriano, and Piñeiro-Chousa 2020), its compensatory effects for isolation (Giardina et al. 2021; Marinucci et al. 2022), problematic on-line gaming (e.g., Blake and Sauermilch 2021; Masaeli and Farhadi 2021) and readaptation post-pandemic (e.g., King et al. 2020). Importantly, editorials have emphasised the role games play in directing future research, situating them as ‘powerful tools for learning and understanding complex situations’ (Lukosch and Phelps 2020), with research on in-game behaviour providing “valid insights into the spread of infections in the real world’ (Kriz 2020, p.407).

The utility of games for learning about pandemics is reflected in an unprecedented event that occurred in the *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). MMORPGs allow players to explore an open world, fight monsters, complete quests, and strategically raid the dwellings of powerful bosses, all in an environment populated with other players (Lakhmani et al. 2016; Bowditch, Chapman, and Naweed 2018). In September 2005, the *World of Warcraft* community experienced a virtual pandemic lasting a month. This phenomenon started with a spell called ‘Corrupted Blood’, inflicted by the end boss of a new combative raid encounter.

Corrupted Blood was a highly contagious hit point-draining ‘debuff,’ meaning it reduced a character’s health over time and spread to nearby players. Ordinarily, the spell should have lifted from a character when leaving the encounter. However, the unexpected result of a software bug meant players carried it with them into the broader virtual world, with the contagion having potential to infect every player in the

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World of Warcraft. Corrupted Blood has attracted the attention of epidemiologists and public health researchers for its potential to offer real-world insights for modelling disease origin and control (e.g., Balicer 2007; Lofgren and Fefferman 2007). The Centre for Disease Control even approached Blizzard Entertainment to examine outbreak data (Oultram 2013). Lofgren and Fefferman (2007) indicated that the involvement of unprogrammed human behaviour in virtual outbreaks bridged the gap between traditional epidemiological studies on populations and computer simulations. However, there is a surprising dearth of empirical research on player behaviour following events like Corrupted Blood. Study of virtual pandemics is predominantly epidemiologic and focused on infectivity and transmission patterns; in the case of Corrupted Blood, risky, altruistic, and anti-social behaviours are described using anecdotes from player blogs and forums. Corrupted Blood has left a legacy, but there has been no in-depth empirical study of lived experiences and behaviour during the event. Moreover, research has yet to directly explore how closely Corrupted Blood resembled and felt like COVID-19.

This study aimed to explore retrospective lived experiences of Corrupted Blood, a 2005 virtual pandemic in the *World of Warcraft* and examine the meaning ascribed to them in light of experiences being lived through COVID-19. The study was underpinned by a social constructivist framework informed by crisis theory and a qualitative action research design was used to elicit perspectives from open-ended written reflections of international survey participants ($N = 59$). Emergent themes associated with experiences of Corrupted Blood were identified using thematic networks analysis.

Three organising themes were identified: (1) *The pandemic was unstoppable*; (2) *pandemic stress*; and (3) *matter in times of crisis and uncertainty*. *Pandemic stress* includes restricted movement and engagement, norm violation, fear and uncertainty, piecing information together, and waiting it out. *The pandemic was unstoppable* was associated with the inescapability of contagion, confusion, denial, disbelief, and perceptions of powerlessness in governance. *Matter in times of crisis and uncertainty* included quarantining, distancing, questing in isolation and coming together. The global theme encapsulating these findings was *when the virtual became virtually real*. This was rhetorically reflective of players having to negotiate their understanding of reality; experiences of the virtual world crossed the boundary into reality, with a sense of surrealism blurring the distinction between the two realms.

This study offers the first empirical account of lived experiences of the Corrupted Blood virtual pandemic and contributes to our understanding of human responses to pandemics more generally, underscoring the importance of learning through virtual worlds.

BIO

Anjum Naweed is a Professor of Human Factors and current ARC Future Fellow based at the Adelaide campus of Central Queensland University. His focus on decision-making, knowledge representation and creative applications of simulation is concerned with the relationship between people and technologies, environments, and systems, beginning with the user experience. He is twice recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Researcher of the Year.

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