



# THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT CHURN/RETURN CYCLE

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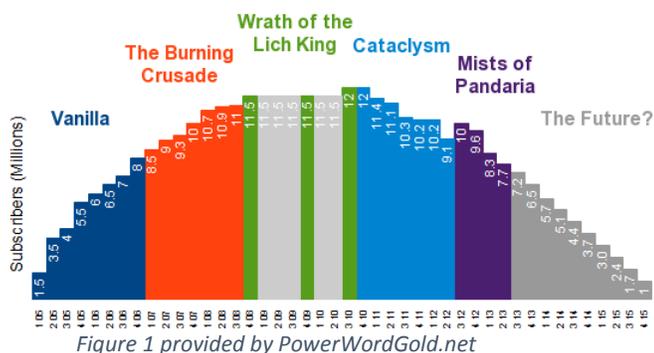
## ABSTRACT

Why is it that the players of World of Warcraft who take a break from the game usually return? Our objective is to obtain qualitative and quantitative data where we can finalize an accurate conclusion through the means of surveying WoW players, browsing the official WoW Forums, and through analyzing previously obtained data from Richard Colby's "Rhetoric of World of Warcraft" class data. We found that players quit because of multiple reasons. Our data did not point to any one specific reason for quitting. We were able to create new parallels through our accumulated data. Factors that lead players to stop playing WoW include finances, friends, separate social obligations, loss of interest, time commitment to the game, or the game itself was no longer enjoyable. Interestingly enough we found in our data that nearly the exact number of people who quit for financial reasons, returned when their financial status improved. Players who quit because of social reasons, returned when their friends began to play again. Players who became bored with the game overall returned for every expansion when new content was released. From our data we can conclude with solid evidence that a majority of players who decide to quit the game will return when their reason for leaving the game is righted.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Old Timer- is the guild member who played back when you didn't get an epic mount until maximum level 60, and just having movement speed on your boots was a rarity... and HE LIKED IT! All these new fangled enhancements to the game has done nothing but make you youngsters soft! Heirlooms are for spoiled brats who never had to grind a REAL level a day in their life. He used to take 2 hours to get a group, then take 3 hours to get there, for 3 more hours of nightmarish spanking fun- just to get thru a 5 man dungeon and get a whopping 3% of a level. That was real WoW'n, not this nancy pancy whipped faceroll content we have now. 25 man hardmodes are nothing when you have extended dynamic raid ID's. He raided when to down the boss you needed 40 people that all spammed one ability over and over again. He was ready to raid like that for the next 25 years. Who cares if it worked!? The Old Timer will never spare a moment to remind everyone just how hard it was back in Classic WoW to anyone that will, or won't listen. He's so old that hey actually killed dinosaurs when he was young... they were out in Un'Goro.*

World of Warcraft Worldwide Subscriber Numbers 2005 - 2013 (and Beyond)



-Deathpony, "Types of Guild Members",  
Blizzard.net Forums, 11/23/2010

In 2011, the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* reached an impressive milestone by peaking subscription rates at 12 million subscribers (see figure 1). What is interesting about this feat is how Blizzard Entertainment managed to continually increase subscription throughout the nine year period. Since its release in 2004,

WoW has changed significantly due to the addition of new content and enhancement of gameplay. This evolution has not only attracted new players to the game but also has led to the decision of many players to leave the game. Despite having players leave the game, WoW continued to maintain lofty user participation rates due to the increasing new player base, as well as the return of veteran players.

Players will play through game content, achieving the goals until there is nothing left to accomplish. This leads to a player feeling bored and soon after, leaving. Later, players come back and upon returning to the game, will experience a sense of rejuvenation. What sets WoW apart from other games is the constant addition of new content. Because the game experiences constant updates, a unique cycle has been developed just for WoW. When players return to WoW, they are immersed in the familiarity of the game. Players will at first be enticed by the changes and engage in the new content. After playing through the content for some time, players will either pursue all of the new content in its entirety or become less interested. This can potentially lead to burnout, which could result in the players cancelling their account again, thus entering a “hiatus” and completing the Churn/Return cycle.

The act of leaving and returning to a game is a common cycle seen in the players of many games. (Yee, 2007) discusses that there is no one definitive reason for player motivation with video games.

*Oftentimes, both the media and researchers into media effects collapse all video gamers into a simplistic archetype. While this facilitates making sweeping generalizations of potentially deviant behaviors or consequences (i.e., addiction and aggression), this strategy inevitably ignores the important fact that different people choose to play games for very different reasons, and thus, the same video game may have very different meanings or consequences for different players. (Yee, 2007, p.774)*

(Yee, 2007) exemplifies that player motivation is individualistic. We hope to approach our research with this same insight. We believe that although each player maintains their own reasons for quitting and returning, there are common themes and overall trends.

The goal of our research is to understand more about this unique Churn/Return cycle. We hope to determine the influence of other unique factors to this cycle. By conducting several types of qualitative and quantitative research, we will determine other factors that influence an individual who decides to leave and then re-subscribe.

## **BACKGROUND**

When researching this topic, our starting point was to determine the answer to the question of whether players ultimately quit the game as opposed to taking a hiatus. Before answering this question we needed to define some important terms.

**Hiatus-** This term refers to a player freezing their account temporarily, voiding the monthly fee, with the intent on resubscribing and continuing to play at a later time (three weeks or more). A hiatus could be taken if a player chooses to focus on life outside the game. A hiatus could also be considered quitting the game if a player has the intention of never playing the game again.

**Burnout-** The feeling of boredom or loss of excitement from a game. Several reasons could lead to a player experiencing burnout. These range from playing the game too often to completing the majority of the content or achieving the highest level or goal of the game.

**Returning Player-** A player (typically a veteran player) who has played a game, chosen to leave, and returned three weeks later or longer.

**Blizzard Forums-** An official online forum provided by Blizzard Entertainment where people who play World of Warcraft can discuss gameplay, strategy, lore, and other topics related to World of Warcraft.

We analyzed factors relating to the Churn/Return cycle by collecting posts from the Blizzard Forums. Once we determined the most common factors, we developed a survey. Parameters had to be established when reading through the forum posts. When looking at forum posts via Blizzard Forums, we collected information from users who had experience with the game before quitting. This means that our search did not include players who only played a trial version of the game (limited gameplay).

One factor is that many players experience feelings of nostalgia. This means that a player chose to reactivate their account due to missing fun aspects of the game. The term Nostalgia is used to specifically refer to a player returning in hopes of reliving the experience of creating a character, and journeying through Azeroth, completing quests, and engaging in dungeon fights with other players. Rettberg (2008) suggests that games are designed to induce feelings of nostalgia in an attempt to earn more revenue:

*From an economic perspective, the purpose of classic arcade games ... was to extract as many quarters from as many players as possible as quickly as possible, while still providing an experience compelling enough that the player would rather wait in line to play the game of his choice than play something else instead... The idea was to deliver the player a quick dose of adrenaline...until he died and was prompted to feed the machine another quarter. (p. 21)*

Rettberg (2008) reveals a potential reason as to why World of Warcraft players experience a burnout sensation when exhausting content but to play again later on. When new content is released, players receive the “quick dose of adrenaline” and are willing to subscribe again.

Another factor was categorized by marketing strategies that Blizzard Entertainment engages in. They have successfully developed a power of bringing players back to the game by incentivizing and offering special deals to unsubscribed players. A main tactic used is habitually developing enticing new content for players to engage in. Gettberg (2008) references the motives of video game manufacturers:

*Each type of videogame and computer game is developed with an idea in mind of how to effectively extract money from its players, and to provide a reliable income stream for its producers. (Rettberg 2008)*

Blizzard/Activision is quite successful at developing marketing strategies aimed at increasing revenue, but why are they so successful? Blizzard regularly introduces new dungeon fights, new gear, and new playable faction races, which appeal to players both old and new. Blizzard Entertainment also influences user return by promoting special offers. The most common of these, a service called *Scroll of Resurrection*, offers rewards and limited edition content for users who reactivated their account.

A final factor that contributes heavily to the unique World of Warcraft Churn/Return cycle is the monthly subscription price (\$14.99 USD/month for World of Warcraft). If a player is not finding the game as fun as it used to be, they will no longer wish to pay the fee.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

In order to collect a sizeable amount of data within the set time constraints of the research timeline, information was pulled from multiple data sources. Our primary data source was the official World of Warcraft forums (Blizzard Forums). Data was collected from the forums by searching specific key terms such as “Hiatus, Return, Taking a break, I’m back, Returning, unfreeze, reactivate, resub, renew account” This forum keyword search technique yielded close to 40,000 threads which related to the Churn/Return cycle in any capacity. Due to limited time the first 5 pages of each search result were copied into a word document for later coding. From these we selected the forum posts that directly pertained to our research question. These 58 forum posts contained reasons for leaving, reasons for returning, how long players were away from the game, if they planned to stay, and if they will return at a later date. The 2012 World of Warcraft Community Survey questions were compiled by 45 students in a first-year writing and research course at the University of Denver, a private university in the Western United States, to address a descriptive research question about the attitudes and practices of World of Warcraft players. The anonymous survey was administered through the Qualtrics application, and a link was posted on select internet forums and Twitter. The survey was kept active for 1 week and had 582 usable responses (excluded responses included those who reported under 18 years of age and respondents who did not complete the majority of the questionnaire). Additional data was accumulated through a survey created through SurveyMonkey; this survey was more specific to the Churn/Return cycle. Some questions used in our survey were similar to questions asked by Blizzard when a user attempts to cancel their account. We posted this survey to Reddit. See appendix A for the questions asked in our Survey.

By utilizing these three sources for there was a large spectrum of data from which to analyze our findings.

## **Coding**

Two of the researchers went through all of the data we accumulated from the Blizzard Forums and placed the data into an Excel spreadsheet that we created. This spreadsheet included pertinent details from each forum post: character name, their achievement score, if they plan to return to the World of Warcraft, If they do say they will return, why, the given length of their hiatus in months, the post date, and a keyword associated with their reasoning for return. Organizing the gathered data into the created Excel spreadsheet allowed for the analyzing of the quantitative data in terms of average months away from the game, what percentage of players plan on returning, and what percentage of posts fall under the chosen keywords. This allowed us to easily compare and contrast data from the forums to the following data sources.

The 2012 WoW community Survey Data downloaded from <http://wow.richardcolby.net> was already in Excel spreadsheet form. We went through all of the questions asked and determined those that were useful to our research question; “Have you ever taken a break from World of Warcraft” “If you have ever taken a break from the game that lasted more than a month, what was the / main reason...” This data was copied into the above listed spreadsheet to compare and contrast players’ reasoning for leaving the game, and subsequently returning to the game.

The responses to the 2014 Churn/Return Survey Data was input into Excel, coding the responses using a Likert-type scale system. When analyzing and interpreting results from our survey, if a strict response was left unanswered (i.e a question containing possible answers of strongly agree, strongly disagree), the assumption was made that the factor did not influence the player’s decision in regards to quitting or returning. If this was the case, the value was assigned a “3” which represents neither agree nor disagree.

### **Forum Posts Regarding Leaving World of Warcraft**

When reviewing posts in the Blizzard Forums, several users expressed concerns regarding the game. Their claims were personal and in depth. Many were in agreement with the factors that we believe contribute to the unique World of Warcraft churn cycle. Other posts provided new insights and explanations from player churn rate. Several terms found in the posts were the terms we used to search for data regarding our research.

#### **Posts That Reference a Players Hiatus**

*I have been playing WoW off and on since launch. Recently, I have been gone for a while playing other MMOs but basically most of them sucked. Right now I got a free trial from Blizzard for 10 days so I took it. Played around a little and realized how much I missed and wanted to come back-* (Alexbones, 2011)

Alexbones provides a post that is testament to how Blizzard structured World of Warcraft to create a sentimental attachment between the player and the game so that they would develop nostalgic feelings later on while not playing.

*My Wife and I came back to the game recently after a 3+ year hiatus for this expansion*  
– (Kumo, 2014)

This post supports our theory that players can be persuaded to return because of Blizzard promoting and adding new content to the game.

*Anywho, I decided to take a break, as many insisted, to renew my “want” to play this game. Three months worked plenty, now I’m anxious to play again..Once the updaters is doner holding me back.....\*mumble mumble\* –(Geleb, 2012)*

Geleb’s post is relevant to Gettberg’s theory about games providing an adrenalin rush which can be addictive and drive a player to pay more money to keep playing after a break.

*I keep coming back because I live on an island in Alaska and there’s nothing else to do in the winter. – (Maltaane, 2014)*

Maltaane’s post shows that forces outside the game, can also be responsible for player churn rate. This is contrary to the many players who engage in the unique cycle due to changes in gameplay.

*What keeps me in WoW. 1) Lore. Played Warcraft 3 all the way through multiple times. Never really touched WC2 [Warcraft 2] (unfortunately). 2) Graphics. They’re stylized to the point where it doesn’t really matter if you look at this game 9 years ago or 2. It all looks the same and still looks spiffy. Went to check out Age of Conan and it looked really dated. 3) Stability. The movement of the characters and the servers are, for the most part, REALLY stable. 4) Gameplay. The classes are all fun and function differently. Their rotations are different from spec to spec and you FEEL like you’re doing something. Some games just don’t have that meaty combat that WoW has. 5) Friends. While I’ve lost some and gained some, they always bring me back because I miss my peoples. - (Barathos, 2011)*

Barathos’s post is a perfect example of the Churn/Return cycle. He points out the factors that in his mind set WoW apart, and then concludes that he will continue to play the game because of said factors, even if he takes a break he comes back.

*I would have to say that the thing that keeps bringing me back is the fact tht I decide what I want to do and when. There is always something interesting I can go do on WoW, from questing, gathering, playing the AH, or just sitting around watching chat windows. I get to decide and that pretty much sums it up :-)- (Starlytes, 2014)*

This is a post that identifies positive aspects to the game, specifically the unique individual experience as well as the social aspect. These factors can attach a player to a

game and influence them to keep playing. The fact that Blizzard now allows for players to work at their own pace, adds to the sentimental connection between the player and the game.

### **Posts Regarding Blizzard Promotions**

*Hi Blizzard, I returned yesterday to wow, I quit 2 years ago. I wasn't really a huge fan of cata [Cataclysm]. I didn't know what I would think of mists of pandera, frankly It really didn't seem to stand out as a xpack what I would like. I saw the new xpack coming out in 2014 advertised and lore wise it seem to rekindle the spark that WOW used to have for me.- (Amberarrow, 2014)*

An interesting observation about this post is how game lore can drive a player's interest in World of Warcraft despite changes in gameplay. When paired with Blizzard promoting new content, game lore can also be used to trigger the nostalgic feelings. This is because World of Warcraft contains a deep history and lore which the game story line follows and progresses in a linear fashion. This suggests that even if new additions gameplay are introduced, and players do not like these advancements, some will choose to play just to experience the advancement of lore.

### **Posts Regarding Changes and Updates to Gameplay**

*Thank you blizzard for creating such a great game. I really enjoy a lot about wow but have realized that I no longer find wow fun. I will possibly come back one day when you fix some of the major problems. I'm not threatening and saying change these or ill leave. I'm going and I Hope to come back one day when you come to your senses. Heres what killed it for me: Flying mounts- you broke immersion. Dungeon finder- you broke the community. Easy leveling- you broke the learning to play part and you outlevel each zone before you even finish the story. This also broke community since everything is already mindlessly easy group up makes it less fun... – (Eleshörn, 2011)*

This post is relevant because it voices the concerns of a veteran player who does not agree with the direction in which the game is going. Although Eleshörn wasn't pleased with the changes to game play, he/she showed interest in returning later on. This shows an intriguing point that veteran World of Warcraft players have developed sentimental attachments to the game and are willing to return regardless of how different the gameplay is.

*...Last week, I decided to come back to my old love (I always loved the game), WoW and see what had become of it. My friend was "It's so casual now!". So I get a scroll of resurrection to save myself from doing 70-80 and start straight into Cataclysm...- (Berith, 2010)*

This post shows that Blizzard Marketing is proficient in inviting players back by providing special offers and rewards.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of our research was to better understand the Churn/Return cycle that commonly occurs with World of Warcraft players. The data we gathered from our various research methods gave insight to the hiatus – that is when and why a player chooses to engage in a hiatus and when and why they choose to end it.

After coding and organizing the data, it was noted that gameplay played the most crucial role in a player's Churn/Return cycle. This statistic gave more potential to the theory that players play through content and get bored with the same content. We connected this theory to the fact that Blizzard releases significant new content for World of Warcraft every one to two years with patches every few months.

It was most interesting that the data revealed that Money/Finances was not as significant of a factor that contributed to the Churn/Return cycle as we initially thought ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). An inference that could be made about this statistic is that the game plays an important role in the player's life and provides enough personal benefit so that the monthly subscription fee is viewed as a necessary cost of living.

We were also able to decipher data that regarded a player's motivation for ending their hiatus and beginning to play World of Warcraft again.

It is interesting to note that 90.57% of the people who took the survey, returned to the game after taking a break from one to twelve months. This can be connected to the fact that Blizzard releases new content in the form of patches as well as promotes a new Expansion Pack usually every year. *See figure 2*

<b>World of Warcraft Expansion Pack Timeline (WoWWiki.com)</b>
World of Warcraft Vanilla released in November 2004
Burning Crusade Expansion Pack announced in October 2005
Burning Crusade Expansion Pack released in January 2007
Wrath of the Lich King Expansion Pack announced in August 2007
Wrath of the Lich King Expansion Pack released in November 2008
Cataclysm Expansion Pack announced in August 2009
World of Warcraft reaches 12 million players in October 2010
Cataclysm Expansion Pack released in December 2010
Mists of Pandaria Expansion Pack announced in October 2011
Mists of Pandaria Expansion Pack released in September 2012
Warlords of Draenor Expansion Pack announced in November 2013
Warlords of Draenor Expansion Pack set to release in December 2014

*Figure 2*

A piece of data that caused the most confusion was the strong voice from players who said that Money/Finances allowed them to return to the game. This is contrary to motivation for players

leaving the game because Money/Finances was the least significant factor. This could be the case because players who no longer play World of Warcraft accumulate the funds that they would otherwise put towards the game.

New content proved to be very important regarding a player’s motivation to return. (M=3.63, SD=1.13) This further supports the theory about players exhausting content or becoming bored with it. A contending factor was the notion that players missed the game. This was interesting because an inference can be made: If players get bored with existing content, engage in a hiatus, then choose to return *because* they miss the game, there might be other factors that create a sentimental bond between the player and the game. This brought us to realize that World of Warcraft might have unique gameplay dynamics or attributed that also contribute to the Churn/Return cycle. While content gets updated in a linear progression, gameplay dynamics such as game goals and class roles stay relatively the same. This concept might be useful for future research topics.

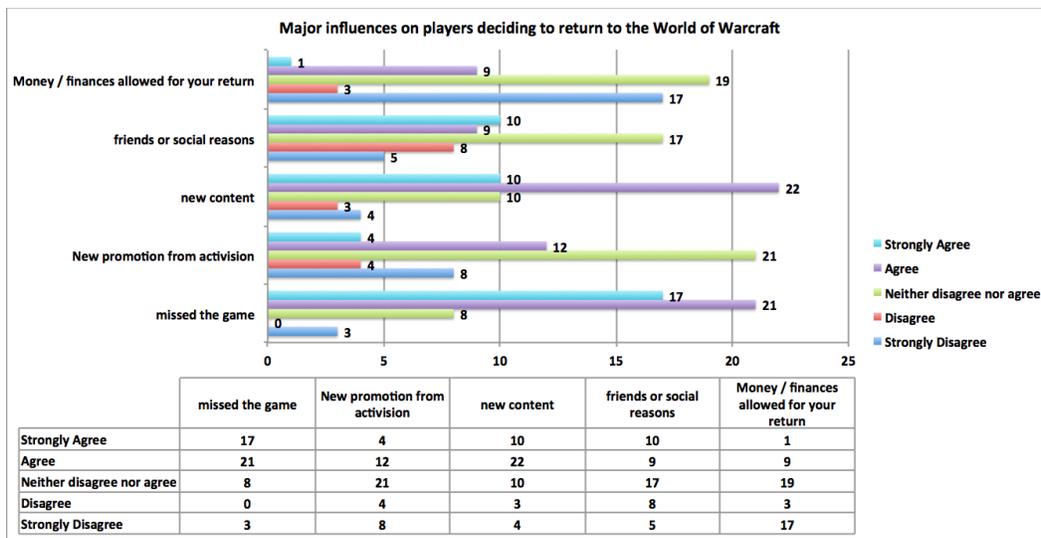


Figure 3

### CHURN / RETURN CYCLE VISUALIZED

Figures 4 and 5 relay information on how responsible each factor is for World of Warcraft’s Churn/Return Cycle. Some correlations were made between the Colby Survey and the Blizzard Forum Data. Money/finances for instance, carried a similar percentage of responsibility for players choosing to return or quit (6% of players chose to quit, 8% of players chose to return). While each factor is responsible in some way like money/finances is, it was determined that there

is not *one* most significant factor. This idea agrees with what (Yee, 2007) expressed. Although overall trends were discovered, each case remains individualistic. The data and forum posts collected provide a broad spectrum of insights from players, each affected by one or more factors on a personal level. Combined, all of these factors make up the Churn/Return Cycle which is unique only to World of Warcraft.

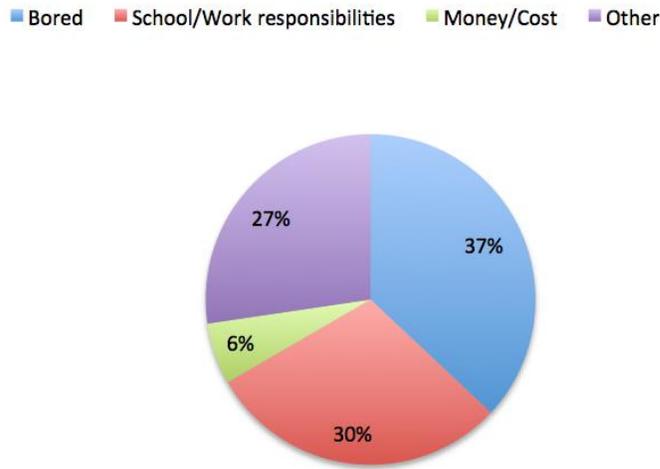


Figure 4, 2012 Community Survey

### Forum players returning to the game

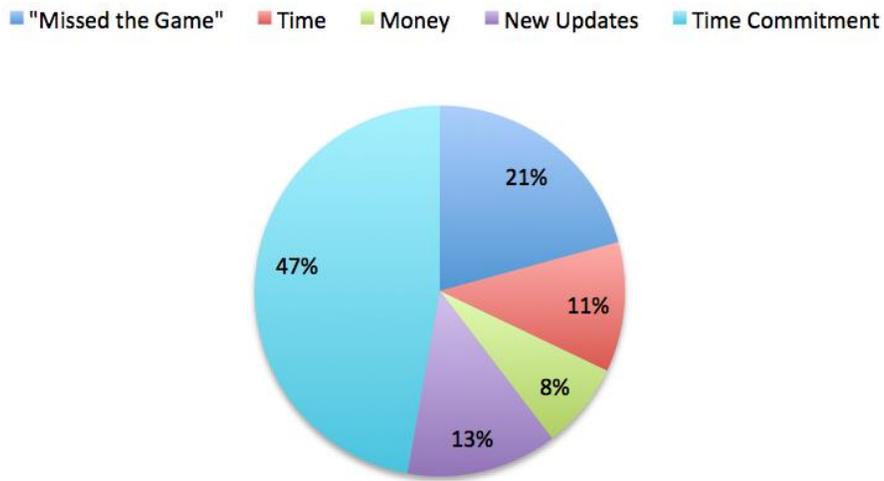


Figure 5

## **Conclusion**

After collecting data on the most significant factors that contribute to World of Warcraft's Churn/Return cycle, more possibilities for future research arose. It was determined that players are most motivated to begin a hiatus because they lose interest in content. It was also determined that the addition to new content is responsible for bringing more players back than any other factor. This conclusion was related to Blizzards timely promotions of new content releases in an attempt to keep the Churn/Return cycle for players within a year.

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## **APPENDIX A**

- 1) Have you ever stopped playing WoW (World of Warcraft) to later return to play the game?
- 2) If you answered "Yes", how many months were you inactive for?
- 3) Did the following factors influence your decision to quit? (for each factor, subjects were given the responses of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree)

- a. WoW's time commitment
  - b. Stopped enjoying WoW gameplay
  - c. Friends or other social reasons
  - d. Money/finances discouraging from gameplay
- 4) Did the following factors influence your decision to play again?
- a. New content was released
  - b. You missed the game
  - c. A new promotion from Blizzard/Activision
  - d. Friends or Social Reasons
  - e. Money/finances allowed for you to return
- 5) Upon return, were you satisfied with the experience? (subjects given the possible answers of no, mostly, or extremely)
- 6) Do you still play the game? If not, why?