2005 Pandemic
World of Warcraft Corrupted Blood Incident

The Corrupted Blood Incident (CBI) was an accidental virtual epidemic that occurred in the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW) developed by Blizzard Entertainment between September 13 and October 8, 2005. The event is significant because it provided epidemiologists with a unique "human-agent lab" to study disease transmission and social behavior during a crisis. It started in newly added raid Zul'Gurub.

The final boss of Zul'Gurub, Hakkar the Soulflayer, cast the debuff Corrupted Blood on raid participants, which was supposed to expire when players defeated Hakkar. The debuff was meant to force coordination, when a player contracted it, the countdown would reset, and without distancing, it would spread further. The breach comes down to hunters and warlocks - the classes that use pets. The players would deactivate their infected animal companions, which would freeze their state. Virus in cryostasis. When back from the raid, in densely populated non-combat zones, like an an auction house, they would summon their pets, and the debuff would spread again.

raid = team of players (~20) organized like a sports team, going through a battle scenario, to gain experience and rewards.

Corrupted Blood

Deals 263 to 337 damage every second to the target and all nearby allies for 10 sec.
Spreads to nearby allies

The most critical point was NPCs contracting the debuff. The pets were disease vectors, while non-player characters became asymptomatic carriers. They have a massive health bar and cannot be 'just killed'.

There was also a huge misinformation problem, Blizzard stayed silent because they scrambled to fix to code, they didn't have a PR statement for accidental digital plague, so the public chat was on fire with theories of what's going on. Blizzard did a server reset to wipe the pandemic.

One of the authors of the cited paper witnessed the outbreak personally. He was 10 years old at that time, he logged in, and saw the streets paved with skeletons. He was genuinely scared. The thought that the major Horde city Orgrimmar was under the attack of the opposing faction, or that it was being attacked by a world boss.

Once the dust settled the researchers started looking at what just happened. It was a simulation they could never run legally. A new methodology introduced itself. Computer models are usually used to calculate and predict the course of disease outbreaks, which is static, with no real human behavior. The math of the virus collided with real unpredictable nature of humans.

This collapse of the "safe zone" led to genuine feelings of fear and confusion among players, blurring the line between the fictional game world and players' emotional responses.This is described as the collapse of the 'magic circle' - the conceptual boundary that separates play from reality, giving new layer to moral decisions.

However it is still an online game and the risk taking is skewed. Dying is a mere inconvenience, you have to run back to your body, lose some money on repairs, but the game isn't over. The existence of hardcore servers could counter this, at least partially. When a player dies, their character is deleted. The panic and risk taking would be very much realistic. But on the contrary, the motivation to spread the viruses would have been much stronger.

Player responses varied. Some acted as real-world health workers, trying to heal infected players. Some spread the disease intentionally, either out of curiosity or malicious intent. There were also bystanders who observed the incident without actively participating. Morality in games becomes optional. But it still mirrors what we see in real outbreaks - panic, flight, altruism, fear, and malice. Some players fled the cities, self quarantined, or entirely logged off.