

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE IMAGINATION **NEW MEDIA IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

Ellen Seiter and Mimi Ito, Series Editors

This book series showcases the best ethnographic research today on engagement with digital and convergent media. Taking up in-depth portraits of different aspects of living and growing up in a media-saturated era, the series takes an innovative approach to the genre of the ethnographic monograph. Through detailed case studies, the books explore practices at the forefront of media change through vivid description analyzed in relation to social, cultural, and historical context. New media practice is embedded in the routines, rituals, and institutions—both public and domestic—of everyday life. The books portray both average and exceptional practices but all grounded in a descriptive frame that renders even exotic practices understandable. Rather than taking media content or technology as determining, the books focus on the productive dimensions of everyday media practice, particularly of children and youth. The emphasis is on how specific communities make meanings in their engagement with convergent media in the context of everyday life, focusing on how media is a site of agency rather than passivity. This ethnographic approach means that the subject matter is accessible and engaging for a curious layperson, as well as providing rich empirical material for an interdisciplinary scholarly community examining new media.

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*Skate Life: Re-Imagining White Masculinity* by Emily Chivers Yochim  
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# MY LIFE AS A NIGHT ELF PRIEST

## An Anthropological Account of *World of Warcraft*

**Bonnie A. Nardi**

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about game play. The guilds in which I conducted research must remain anonymous, but Terror Nova, a guild of colleagues with whom I play, was a source of scholarly input as well as friendly mayhem. My family guild, the Hoodoos, blasted through Azeroth with the tight coordination of people who know each other very well.

I would like to thank the players who agreed to be interviewed. They offered thoughtful commentary on their play experiences and called my attention to important matters that I did not pick up on from observations of game play. Many undergraduate students at the University of California, Irvine, where I teach, talked to me informally about their play, and I learned from, and very much enjoyed, those conversations.

Throughout my career, nearly all of my research has been about the use of technology at work. Moving to play, with its elements of whimsy, fantasy, freedom, and fun, was a pleasing turn to a novel arena of activity. But it entailed facing an unfamiliar literature going back 80 years. Surprisingly, very little of what I read was trite or uninteresting. I acknowledge with appreciation the analysis and theorizing of scholars from older traditions whose work remains fresh and pertinent, as well as those on the contemporary scene who are picking up and extending foundational work and moving ahead to lay out new paths of investigation.

At the present moment, we may well be in a golden age of games scholarship. Some amazing social scientists, computer scientists, educators, philosophers, media scholars, legal scholars, and journalists, many of whom you will meet in the pages of this book, have turned their attention to elucidating the import and meanings of play and games. I appreciate the quality of the work they have produced and their remarkable efforts to shape concerns about play and games into a rich multidisciplinary stream of scholarship.

Finally, I am grateful to the complex assemblage that is the *World of Warcraft*—players, designers, corporate purveyors, software artifacts—which has proved an endlessly fascinating object of discovery and inquiry.

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## Prologue

0/12 19:36:38.533 [Raid] Loro: Now Slams and I have been talking about a lot of events regarding our guild and how it can be improved.  
0/12 19:37:14.349 [Raid] Roberto: rofl why is everyone on tables  
0/12 19:38:13.848 [Raid] Slams: I have always found that  
0/12 19:38:23.224 Roberto yells: I will be the right hand of loro. :)  
0/12 19:38:47.301 [Raid] Slams: a guild that melds together as friends is one that essentially succeeds.  
0/12 19:38:55.099 Noth kneels before Slams.  
0/12 19:38:58.342 [Raid] Loro: Exactly slams.  
0/12 19:39:15.218 [Raid] Leanallah: i agree  
0/12 19:39:18.516 [Raid] Slams: you could essentially play this game alone  
0/12 19:39:18.341 Roberto bursts into dance.  
0/12 19:39:34.315 [Raid] Aziki: cant to endgame alone tho :/  
0/12 19:39:35.935 [Raid] Eleanor: uhh, Roberto, did you forget your valium?  
0/12 19:39:40.552 Sabina applauds at Roberto. Bravo!  
0/12 19:39:42.314 [Raid] Loro: Roberto please settle down.  
0/12 19:39:57.593 [Raid] Roberto: :)  
0/12 19:40:05.021 [Raid] Slams: While leveling up to get to higher level content is crucial—a strong sense of community is crucial as well.  
0/12 19:40:11.816 [Raid] Loro: I find that by partying and questing together, we make the game a little more fun.

- 0/12 19:41:34.032 [Raid] Loro: social events tend to be successful in attracting other members.
- 0/12 19:45:49.638 [Raid] Slams: See, if our goal as a guild is to have a constant flow of 5 man raids . . . we've reached that goal.
- 0/12 19:46:08.531 [Raid] Slams: If we want to be able to do 40 man raids consistently . . . we haven't reached that.
- 0/12 19:46:52.846 Robertoh begins to eat in front of Sasha.
- 0/12 19:46:53.222 Noth flirts with Aziki.
- 0/12 19:46:59.508 [Raid] Eleanor: i think doing raids could be enjoyable
- 0/12 19:46:59.213 Noth blows Aziki a kiss.

In the spring of 2005, I taught an undergraduate course on social aspects of digital technologies. The students worked in teams on research projects. One team reported on massively multiplayer online role-playing games. I knew nothing of these games. But the students' presentation impressed me—artistic screenshots, the students' excitement as players, the discussion the topic sparked in class. Note to self: find out what this is about.

I listened when students talked about video games in casual conversation. Colorful but unfamiliar names jangled in my brain: *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, *Final Fantasy*, *Guild Wars*. The game that kept coming up was *World of Warcraft*. Based on this highly unscientific sampling, I decided to try out *WoW*, as it is known, to further my broad research goal of studying social life on the Internet. In December of 2005, I signed up for an account with Blizzard Entertainment, the maker of the game, and began to play. I planned to play for a few months until I knew enough to conduct some interviews. I didn't expect to like the game—I had played board games as a child and found them uninteresting. I tried to prevent my own children from playing video games, which I considered a waste of time.

When I sat down with *World of Warcraft*, I had no idea what to do. Luckily my son Christopher was home from college for Christmas break. He helped me create an animated character with which to adventure in the three-dimensional virtual world. Despite my antigame campaign, Christopher had played text-based online role-playing games, and, although he was not familiar with *World of Warcraft*, he seemed to understand basic game semantics. We set forth on a quest. "Click on the monster and right click!" he suggested. I obeyed. My frantic clicking produced the salutary

effect of killing the monster (which would soon have killed my character). Such activity seemed inordinately silly, but I was secretly smitten with the beautiful *WoW* graphics and charmed to be a character called a Night Elf.

The moment I began to find *World of Warcraft* truly interesting was when two small icons appeared on the top right portion of my screen. I had not placed them there, nor was I killing monsters; in fact I was relaxing in the woodsy hometown of the Night Elves, Shadowglen. My son explained that another player had caused the icons to appear—they were "buffs," or temporary magic spells to enhance my powers. In that moment I became aware of *other players*. I was not alone in the Night Elves' Garden of Eden but surrounded by real human players who would interact with me. I was touched that another player had given me something for free, without my asking or even having a way to thank him.

My son's brief tutelage ended as he returned to college. Unlike many players, I was not playing with friends or family members who could guide me through the new virtual world. I was a "newbie" (noob, n00b, nub, more derisively) of the first order. I soon learned that I could have thanked the player who buffed me in a couple ways—by typing a message into the chat window or by clicking on his character and typing a command, /ty, which would inform him of my gratitude. I was very happy to know this when I ran out of game money and had to ask a strange player what to do. He promptly gave me some coppers so I could repair my damaged equipment and go forth once more to slay the Webwood spiders lurking in the forest outside the village.

I have given many hours to the study of *World of Warcraft* since the Shadowglen days. I believe *World of Warcraft* is an exemplar of a new means of forming and sustaining human relationships and collaborations through digital technology. While video games might seem a frivolous footnote to modern technology (and video games researchers still get pitying stares from colleagues), the games have penetrated unlikely arenas of human activity, stirring interest in education, business, the military, and even religious organizations. Educators argue that video games have pedagogical value (Gee 2003; Squire 2005; Steinkuehler 2006; Barab et al. 2007; Fields and Katai 2007; Ang and Zaphiris 2008; Hayes and Games 2008; Polin 2009; Sharritt 2009). Experiments with gamelike environments for work are under way at the world's largest multinational corporations, including Intel, Boeing, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, and Sun Microsystems (Cefkin et al.

2009; Nardi et al. 2009; Yee 2009). Many organizations have applications in *Second Life*, a 3D virtual world in which participants themselves build applications. An article in the *Harvard Business Review* reported research suggesting that people with experience in *World of Warcraft* make better corporate managers (Reeves et al. 2008). The U.S. Army produced and distributed, free on the Internet, a successful multiplayer video game, *America's Army*, designed as a recruiting and public relations tool (Delwiche 2007). DARPA, the research wing of the U.S. Army, funds research in the use of multiplayer games for combat and noncombat applications. Christian evangelists recruit new members through video games such as *America's Army* (Li 2004) and other games. In short, video games have entered the culture.

Some readers will have encountered *WoW* through media accounts that report the unusual, the sensational, the surprising—addicted players, Chinese gold farmers, online marriages, griefers, hackers, gender swappers. While these memes are not without interest, they do not embody the texture of the everyday experiences and emotions of the millions of players who constitute *World of Warcraft*. I will use the vehicle of the ethnographic monograph to provide a perspective on player experience that taps the ordinary, the mundane, the normal, the commonplace in and around *World of Warcraft*.

*WoW* players will recognize that references to the game belong to a moment in time. *World of Warcraft* is always changing, with software updates that extend the game with new content. The research for the book began in December 2005 and ended on October 11, 2008, when I attended the final day of BlizzCon 2008 (Blizzard's annual conference). I continued to study *WoW*, but BlizzCon marked the completion of the first phase of the research, and it is that which is reported in this book (with a few exceptions, which are noted).

## Aims of the Book

For all that has been written about play, it remains a contentious subject. The first aim of the book is to develop an argument about *World of Warcraft* that examines play as active aesthetic experience, drawing on activity theory (Leont'ev 1974) and the work of philosopher John Dewey. I am interested

in the peculiarities of human play. Play links us to the upper reaches of the animal kingdom while at the same time generating distinctive cultural constructs. Sports, gambling, and a multitude of games, from mah-jongg to *Monopoly* to *World of Warcraft*, are some of *Homo sapiens*' most curious productions.

Understanding play in its contemporary digital manifestations is a second aim of the book. I argue that video games such as *WoW* are a *new visual-performative medium* enabled, and strongly shaped, by the capacities of digital technology, in particular the execution of digital rules powerful enough to call forth complex worlds of activity. This new medium orients human activity in a stimulating visual environment that makes possible a release of creativity and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality, and positive reward. The importance and impact of design on human activities undertaken in the visual-performative medium is a key theme.

A third aim of the book is ethnographic reportage—interpreting experiences of playing *World of Warcraft* for those who will never play but wish to understand something of the role of video games in our culture. This aim shapes Part three in particular, which examines topics such as addiction and gender about which I am often asked when describing my work.

The research was carried out in three locales: the virtual world of the game itself; Southern California, where my students and I conducted interviews; and China, where my research assistants and I spent a month observing players in Internet cafes and talking to them about *World of Warcraft*.

## CHAPTER ONE

# What Is *World of Warcraft* and Who Plays It?

Once I got over my initial disorientation in the game, I developed a strong sensation that I had woken up inside an animated fairy tale. I was not just watching and listening though; I played a starring role. *WoW* is a virtual experience like reading a book or watching a movie, but also an active experience like playing a sport. The digital universe couples the richness of the experience of viewing the action in a film or play with the participatory experience of athletics. Many video games are structured around this powerful combination, so perhaps it is not surprising that they have surpassed film in revenue (Bainbridge 2007). Video games have global appeal; some of the most popular titles are from Asia. *World of Warcraft*, produced in California, has more Chinese players than any other national group. *WoW* is played in North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. It is available in English, two versions of Chinese, Korean, German, French, two versions of Spanish, and Russian.

As someone entirely new to video games when I began the research, I am aware of how foreign they seem to many, even how pointless, simplistic, fatuous. I will attempt to build a picture of the captivation and fascination it is possible to experience in *World of Warcraft*, mindful that the visual allure, and sense of discovery and serendipity that imbue *WoW* play, cannot be captured in descriptive prose. Like Borges's cartographers, one desires to create a map that coincides "point for point" with the richness of the real geography. But that is neither possible nor wise, so I will fall back on a selective portrayal that communicates some, at least, of what it was that got the undergraduates so excited.

## What Is *World of Warcraft* and Who Plays It?

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### A Day in the Life of a Night Elf Priest

To begin, I recount a day in the life of my character Innikka (a pseudonym). She belongs to a "guild" or club of players with whom she plays and socializes. The priest character type in *World of Warcraft* heals players being attacked by monsters or other players, restoring them so that they may defeat their opponents and avoid a trip to the graveyard, the penalty for death. Dead players must run back to the spot where they died to be resurrected.

It is 6:00 a.m. Before facing my emails, I login to *WoW*. I'm checking the stock of a computer character that sells herbs I need for potions produced in the alchemy profession. Dealer Sadaqat, who vends "Potent Potables," has rock-bottom prices. It's early, and no one else is around. Sadaqat has dreaming glory, felweed, and netherbloom, as well as some potions I can buy and resell for a profit at the Auction House. I spend about five seconds selecting and purchasing the herbs and logoff.

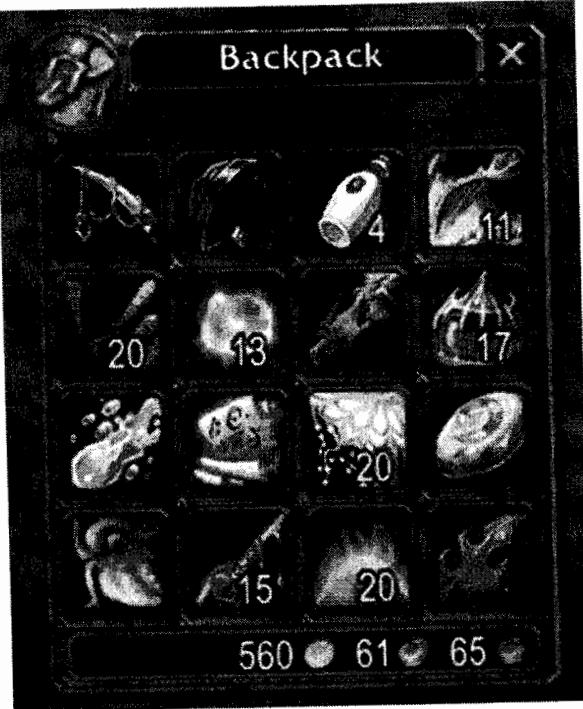
5:30 p.m. Time for a raid. It's early in the evening for me, but many people in the guild are on the East Coast, so we have to get moving before it's too late for them. The raid won't start until 6:00, but "invites" go out 30 minutes in advance. To make sure I get a spot in the raid, I login promptly.

Raiding is one of the most complex activities in *World of Warcraft*, involving 10 to 40 people who join together to defeat difficult monsters. Careful preparation and tight coordination are necessary. Raiders communicate through *WoW*'s text chat and nearly always use voice chat as well.

I still have fifteen minutes before the raid. I fly into the Terokkar Forest and locate some good fishing spots. In a few minutes I have lots of the Hidden Darters needed for the Golden Fish Sticks buff. I cook them up and feel prepared for the raid.

It's time to head to Serpentshrine Cavern, the site of the raid, for our first attempt at "SSC." Most of us have read up on the SSC fights in out-of-game forums, blogs, and wikis created and maintained by players. Some of us have watched player-created YouTube videos to get a sense of what lies ahead.

We are nervous and excited. There's lots of silly banter in the guild chat channel. Players invoke small commands called emotes to dance, flirt, kiss, hug, and execute other amusing actions. I exchange "whispers," or private



A Player's Bags Carry Their Items: Items in bag slots are labeled with the number of each. A player's gold is displayed; Inniikka had 560 gold, 61 silver, and 65 copper at the time the picture was taken.

chats, with several guildmates. We will encounter difficult raid "bosses," that is, high-level monsters with tricky, powerful abilities. The bosses will "drop" very good "loot"—or treasure—valuable pieces of equipment that empower characters to perform their roles more effectively.

SSC is situated behind an enormous waterfall that players can penetrate only when formally grouped in a raid. We run through the waterfall. Promptly someone is comically killed by the "elevator boss"—the player has dashed into an open elevator shaft and fallen to his death. I have read about the elevator in player descriptions of SSC and step carefully to wait for it to rise to our level.

Once on the elevator, we descend deep into the cavern. Finally we are facing the first "trash mobs," that is, guards who must be killed on the way to the bosses. (*Mob* is a generic name for monster, derived from *mobile*.) Players call them trash because, while powerful, they rarely yield good treasure. We buff the raid with several life-giving, damage-enhancing, mob-defeating spells and proceed.

We immediately "wipe" on the trash—that is, the whole raid is killed. Everyone runs back from the graveyard for another try. We pull ourselves together and successfully kill the guards.

Now we are at the first boss we will attempt, a creature called the Lurker Below. He lives in a pool and must be fished up. We stand on platforms surrounding his pool. We catch the Lurker on a fishing line and begin battle. The raid erupts into a chaos of loud, frenetic activity. *WoW*'s sound effects layer the roars of the monsters, a mélange of auditory signals associated with player actions, the noises of special events such as explosions, and a musical sound track.

Things are going pretty well until the Lurker issues a "spout," during which we are supposed to dive off the platforms into the water. Some dive too late and are killed. We try to keep going with a diminished raid but lack the resources to bring down Lurker. We wipe and run back yet again.

After wiping, it takes time to reassemble, rebuff, and discuss what went wrong. In voice chat, the raid leaders tell us what to do and provide assessments of our mistakes. We ask questions and crack jokes. My guild, "Scarlet Raven," is a "casual raiding guild," so, while people are intent on performing well, there are no recriminations.

After one more wipe, we are getting the hang of the Lurker. We know when to jump into the water and how to coordinate so the minions he summons will not kill us.

This time the Lurker goes down. The raid is deliriously happy. Through teamwork and personal skill, we have survived the Lurker's deadly spouts, geysers, and water bolts—or at least most of us have. The fallen are raised by the healers. A group screenshot is taken of us surrounding the dead Lurker and will be posted later to the Scarlet Raven website.

We roll virtual dice on the Lurker's loot to see who will win it. Miraculously, I win the Earring of Soulful Meditation, a very fine trinket. We congratulate those who won loot and exult in our first kill in Serpentshrine Cavern.

Now it's time to try Hydross the Unstable, so named because he has lost his mind under the duress of a lengthy imprisonment in SSC. The crazed Hydross has several powerful allies at his behest, which must be quickly dispatched. We get ready for a very different kind of fight. The same cycle of wipes and retries ensues. Finally we defeat Hydross.

It has been an amazing evening. It's 10:00 p.m. for me but 1:00 a.m. for

East Coast guildmates. We must end the raid even though there are more bosses to kill in Serpentshrine Cavern. Guildmates say good night.

After all the excitement, I fly back to my quiet post in Stormspire to resume the vigil of the Potent Potables vendor.

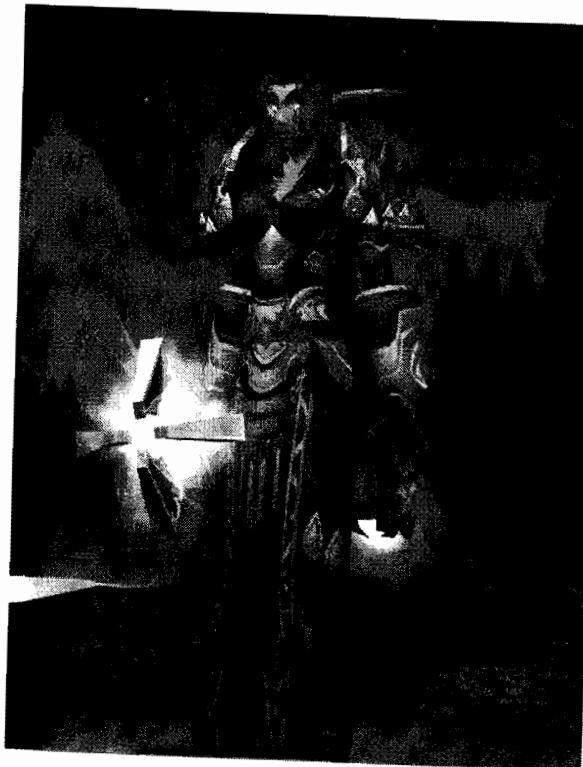
### A Short *WoW* Primer

Based on a long line of fantasy themes derived from a variety of sources, including *Lord of the Rings* and its predecessors, *World of Warcraft* is staged in a medieval setting. Players create animated fantasy characters that adventure in a landscape of castles, dungeons, ogres, dragons, and beasts (Fawcett 2006; Tschang 2007). Players battle monsters, amass treasure, conduct business at an auction house, practice crafts such as alchemy and blacksmithing, and seek to improve their characters through the acquisition of ever better weapons and armor. Players start at level 1 and can advance to level 80, in a process known as “leveling,” by slaying monsters and completing quests (minigames) that award “experience points.” The character is seen in the third person, usually from behind.<sup>1</sup>

*WoW* is a game of movement. The game geography is huge. Characters travel on foot or by beast, boat, or air through fields, farms, forests, jungles, deserts, mountains, seas, and other distinctive scenery for which Blizzard artists have won many awards. Players quest to find and slay hundreds of different types of creatures from the game’s “bestiary”—creatures dwelling throughout the varied landscapes of the world.

The construction of the world has strong appeal to the modern consciousness—everything is human scale. No building is more than a few stories high. (Some areas are reached by elevator but are only one or two levels once one arrives.) The objects players wear, wield, win, buy, and sell, including weapons, vials of magical potions, fishing poles, armor, crafting implements such as mining picks, and resources like herbs, cloth, and precious stones, are easily handled by the (virtual) human hand.

*WoW* provides respite from the incessant advertising which is the backdrop of so much contemporary activity. Most of the Internet can no longer be experienced without a barrage of ads; *WoW* has none. It is restful, even old-fashioned. The only claim on the player’s consciousness is the game itself, allowing the kind of immersion one imagines Victorians attained



Innikka

with their hefty novels into which they could sink for hours of commerce-free entertainment. This focused experience provides a refuge—an “escape,” as players say—from modernity. It is one of the ways in which the game creates its own reality apart from contemporary life, moving the player away from the ordinary into the alternative reality of a fantasy space.

*WoW* is a *virtual world*—a set of linked activities chosen by the player and carried out within a three-dimensional virtual space.<sup>2</sup> The goal of most *WoW* activities is to develop a character, enabling it to perform more and more difficult challenges. The orientation toward character development oddly echoes another Victorian meme; Victorians also worked at “character development,” which for them meant striving to improve moral sensibilities. The notion that one’s “character” can be shaped and refined through deliberate activity is a powerful motivational field in which cultures, or subcultures, may organize themselves. Many video games take up this theme; Hunter and Lastowka (2004) observed that in games such as *EverQuest*,

*Dark Age of Camelot*, and *Ultima Online* “the clear goal is to become a more powerful [player].”

*WoW* researchers are often asked, “But isn’t *WoW* just killing monsters”? Media discourse around video games often centers on questions of violence, so it is a natural question. While my work is not about violence, I want to clarify for those not familiar with *World of Warcraft* that it is not a violent game in the tradition of first-person shooters or certain strategy games in which realistic violence is central to the games’ visceral appeal.<sup>3</sup> Killing monsters is an important activity in *WoW*, but it is in some sense an abstraction, a way to keep score. Play theorists observe that play often involves a contest. The Anglo-Saxon *plega* meant game, sport, fight, or battle (Turner 1982). A game requires something to battle against. *WoW* monsters are cartoonish, often silly, and in no way terrifying or realistic. They waddle, many are corpulent and ungainly, they emit gurgling noises when they die—and of course they will soon be back for the next encounter. *WoW* has none of the graphic visceral realism found in other video games such as blood splatters or frightening weaponry.<sup>4</sup>

Taylor’s comment (2003a) about violence in *EverQuest* could also describe *World of Warcraft*:

While combat in the game is on the one hand quite extreme (you kill monsters and potentially other players) and on the other also muted (there is graphically no blood or gore), my sense is that the enjoyment of violence takes place at an abstract level. It is closely tied to the skills involved to take down a mob, the precise timings and movements required, the skill of playing your class well in a battle situation, the adrenaline rush involved with a fight and the general ability to even engage in this type of activity . . . In this way the actual fight is as much an opportunity to demonstrate the valued qualities of game mastery as anything.

Players can create multiple characters. Ducheneaut et al. (2009) found an average of eight characters per *WoW* account. Usually one is the “main” character and the rest “alts” or alternative characters. Eight characters may sound like a lot, but many players focus on their main and play other characters only briefly to try them out or occasionally for a change.

Players may join guilds—named groups with officers and a chat channel—so they will have others with whom to play. In the opening vignette

in the Prologue, Innika’s guild is having a meeting. Guilds range in size from a small handful to several hundred players (Ducheneaut et al. 2006). A character can belong to only one guild. Many players are guildless at the lower levels (and some beyond). Guilds become more important as players gain interest in certain of the more challenging activities in the game or in leveling quickly by grouping with others. Officers control guild membership. They can induct new members as well as remove players. In the vignette, Loro and Slams are guild officers trying to move the guild toward more organized activities to engage new game experiences.

Much sociable chat takes place in the guild channel. Most is game related although players may remark on their local weather, mention that they have a test to study for, or supply other small details revealing something of their personal lives. *World of Warcraft* is not a chat room, however, and personal information in the guild channel is limited. Some guilds have websites with forums and player profiles, some with photos and personal information, so players may get to know quite a bit about each other. Many players know each other in real life; however, they speak infrequently about their real lives in public chat channels. Players get to know more about one another through whispers. A feeling of intimacy may develop, but it remains private; the guild as a social unit is devoted to the game itself along with a lot of jokey banter.

Players may maintain a “friends list” that includes players inside and outside the guild. When a friend logs on or off, the system notifies the player with a small sound and a text message.

Parties and raids are temporary groups formed to accomplish a goal such as a quest or raid. They are composed of players with different, interdependent skills. Players choose a “class”—priest, paladin, mage, warlock, rogue, hunter, shaman, druid, warrior, or death knight—each of which has its own distinctive skills. Skills are divided into *damage* classes, whose powerful weapons and spells kill the monsters; heavily armored *tank* classes which use their abilities to gain the attention of the monsters to keep them from attacking others; and *healing* classes which restore players as they are attacked. Healers must ensure the survival of tanks, without whom the group will almost certainly perish (see Taylor 2006).

*WoW* vernacular names the various groupings with a masculine adjective: 5-man parties and 10-, 20-, 25-, and 40-man raids. Raids are conducted in “dungeons”—elaborate fantasy structures such as a school for

necromancy, a decrepit mansion, the underground control room of a vast reservoir.

Parties and raids have their own chat channels. *WoW* has several chat channels, including general chat which broadcasts to a fairly large geographic area in the game, “yelling” which reaches a smaller local area, and “say” for a small local area.

Characters are divided into races. Medievally accented, *WoW* races are rooted in earlier games such as the paper and pencil *Dungeons and Dragons* and Blizzard’s *Warcraft* series. Race is largely cosmetic (although each race has a few abilities players may deem useful). Players are divided into two “factions,” each with its own races. The Alliance races—Night Elf, Gnome, Human, Dwarf, and Draenei—are generally considered more genial. The Horde faction is a bit scruffier; the Orc, Tauren, Troll, Undead, and Blood Elf races are (except for Blood Elves), rougher, bigger, or more depraved (e.g., Undead cannibalize). Selecting a race is an important decision; players will be looking at their characters a lot. Players consider some races ugly and some beautiful. Ducheneaut et al. (2009) reported that players were very aware of the looks of their characters, noting that “hair matters” and that players carefully chose among interesting features such as horns or facial tattoos (see also Noël et al. 2009). Gender is also an important cosmetic attribute with implications discussed in chapter 8.

The core battle experience in *World of Warcraft* is killing computer-generated monsters. But another kind of contest is popular among a segment of the population—player vs player. In PvP, players can attack and kill the characters of other players.

This style of play is abhorred by some and adored by others. Blizzard thus created two types of servers: “normal” or PvE (player vs environment) servers, where PvP is not permitted except in limited areas, and PvP servers where players can be attacked by other players in most (but not all) of the game geography. Players choose their server type when creating a character. In PvP, players enjoy “pwning” opponents, that is, defeating them, in heated contests. The term *pwn* (pronounced “pone”) comes from *own*, slang for *defeat*, and is said to have originated when a player mistakenly typed a “p” instead of an “o,” the two being adjacent on the QWERTY keyboard. (Pwning is possible in many contexts, not just PvP.)

PvP increases contingency, ratcheting the game experience up a level—players must be constantly aware of surrounding players and ready to do

battle (or flee) at any moment. Nonplayer characters (NPCs) are predictable and can usually be avoided if the player is not ready to fight. But human players bring cunning, sneakiness, and what I can only call orneriness to the game. Players trying to complete quests may be attacked and killed, slowing their progress. “Ganking” is the practice of attacking players at a lower level than oneself (and hence easy to kill) or attacking at sensitive times such as when a player is trying to complete a difficult quest or is almost dead from a fight. An extreme form of ganking is “corpse camping,” wherein a player kills another player and remains by the corpse, “camping” it, killing the player after he resurrests and is in a weakened condition (sometimes repeatedly). These actions are perfectly legal in the game; the prescribed remedy is to get a posse of guildmates and friends to kill the ganker.

A third type of server is devoted to role-playing in which characters speak in a kind of humorous, ersatz Ye Olde English patois (see Kavetsky 2008). I have conducted no research on these servers, and they are much less popular than PvE or PvP servers. However, they have their devotees and are said to attract mature, serious players.

## MMORPGs and Virtual Worlds

Another descriptor for *World of Warcraft* is MMORPG or massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Chess is an early example of a game whose pieces are humanlike characters instead of ciphers (as in checkers). A bit of backstory accompanies the chess pieces, but chess is a strategy game, not one in which players develop a unique character with a particular role, as in role-playing games. In role-playing games (whether pencil and paper, board games, or online), players choose a single character type. In *WoW* they choose one of ten types called “classes” and develop the character as they wish.

MMORPGs are role-playing games with hundreds, thousands, or millions of players. However, the acronym is awkward and not entirely accurate. *World of Warcraft* is a social world as much as a game. It is similar in some ways to environments such as *Second Life* in which participants create characters and activities in a three-dimensional virtual world (see Klastrup 2008).

I will refer to environments such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* as

virtual worlds. In these worlds, participants (1) create an animated character, (2) move the character in a three-dimensional space, (3) have means for communicating with others, and (4) access a rich array of digital objects. As elsewhere, the culture of a virtual world is enacted through human conversation and designed objects that mediate activity (Leontiev 1974; Vygotsky 1986). Virtual worlds perhaps feel more authentically like cultures than chat rooms because of the elaboration of space and objects.

### Who Plays *World of Warcraft*?

While in a long line to purchase memorabilia at BlizzCon, an older man and a younger woman stood in front of me. The man (probably recognizing a familiar life form) turned around and said in a friendly way, "What characters do you play?" We got to talking, and he turned out to be the woman's father. They both played, as did the man's son. The man said he played "so I have something to talk to my kids about." The woman had met her husband in *WoW*. They played together casually at first, then started talking in voice chat, then arranged a face-to-face meeting, although they lived across the country from one other. Things went well, and they got married, had a baby, and seemed to be living happily ever after. Baby was in the hotel with hubby and grandma, who also played, so that mom and granddad could have some free time at the conference.

By the time I got to BlizzCon I was not surprised to hear this story. But when I began my research, I assumed that the stereotype of the video gamer as self-absorbed young male with few social skills and little interest in anything beyond gaming was probably more or less true. ("A fat guy living in his mother's basement" is one satirical stereotype.) I was pleased to run into a much more interesting mix of people. My demographic data slowly accumulated as I got to know players in my guilds and as I chatted informally with players in "pickup groups" or "pugs" (ad hoc groups much like pickup basketball games formed for questing or raiding).

The *WoW* player population had considerable variance in age, gender, and social class. One of my online friends was a carpenter who worked in a factory making windows. Another was an intensive care nurse. An older guildmate had multiple disabling chronic illnesses. He took many medications, some of which kept him awake. *World of Warcraft* was a major part

### What Is *World of Warcraft* and Who Plays It?

of his social life, and he played at odd hours, day and night. A former guild master in Scarlet Raven was a graduate student in chemistry.

A student we interviewed in San Diego described the demographic diversity of the 40-man raids he attended.

You've got forty men—well, men in general, but they have women, and children there too, and it's pretty fun. You have a group of people trying to work for the same purpose.

No solid demographic information is publicly available for *World of Warcraft*. The problems of sampling 11 million players playing in seven languages and many more national cultures are daunting. Yee's self-reported data, collected on websites outside the game with a sample of 2,000 players, indicated about 21 percent female players (Yee 2005). My guess is that this figure is probably roughly correct for North American servers but almost certainly wrong for China, where my counts in Internet cafes showed about 10 percent female players. There are no public data of any kind for European, Korean, Latin American, and other players of which I am aware. My goal is not to pin down precise numbers (which is impossible) but to suggest that *World of Warcraft* is more open to females and older players than games such as first-person shooters (see Fullerton et al. 2007) and that *WoW* is a virtual world in which different social classes rub elbows.

How does one determine age, gender, and social class in a virtual fantasy world? Players themselves make this information available. The Scarlet Raven website had a photo gallery, so gender and approximate age were obvious for players who posted pictures. When players spoke on voice chat, gender was revealed. Age was trickier as voice quality was not always clear and age can only be approximately guessed through voice. Social class was often revealed as people used class-specific grammar (for example, uttering phrases such as "I seen the mob"). Photographs on the Scarlet Raven website showed homes and furnishings typical of particular social classes. Occupation is a good indicator of social class, and players often mentioned their occupations in chat or on the guild website. Smoking and social class are correlated (Jha et al. 2006). Players often paused for smoke breaks.

My sense is that the statistically modal player in *World of Warcraft* is a male in his twenties (see Yee 2005). But statistics do not reveal the nuances of the social atmosphere created by the presence of male and female, older

and younger players. Scarlet Raven had a couple of young teens whose parents played in the guild. Occasionally the teens would make inappropriate remarks. One would often leave in the middle of a group activity when he had something else to do. While these events were annoying, it was part of the culture of the guild to tolerate the young people. Some of the older members such as an architect and a real estate agent were stabilizing influences, sometimes making calming remarks to defuse a tactless chat comment or ward off misinterpretation. The guild leaders were in their twenties and thirties, and one in his forties. They did not hesitate to remove players who behaved inappropriately. One evening a young male player typed the URL of a porn site into the chat line. The next night I saw him removed from the guild as someone had reported the incident to an officer. Scarlet Raven was far from a squeaky clean guild, but promulgating porn was outside its boundaries.

The presence of female players mitigated rough masculine discourse, toning down, although certainly not eliminating, profanity, homophobic discourse, and sexist comments. Language was negotiated. One evening a female player objected to a male player's liberal use of the F word in voice chat because her young children were nearby. The male player countered that he always talked that way and could not change. His girlfriend, who was also playing, said, "Come on, Tellison. You don't talk like that around my mother." Tellison managed to express himself more conservatively that evening. However, the dominance of male players statistically, and in terms of masculine rhetorical style, was assumed and protected (a topic explored further in chapter 8). When I first spoke on voice chat after joining a new guild, the raid leader said, "Oh, this is a girl." I said jokingly, "Yes, this is a girl, you have to be nice." He shot back, "No, we don't!"

Many players commented on the mix of players as a positive aspect of the game. A student at the University of California, San Diego, said:

And, you know, as far as game play goes, like, there are people with different backgrounds that come together. Yeah, that really amazes me. I don't know what else to say. I mean, if I go on anymore it might sound corny, you know. So, yeah, but it's just that feeling.

Despite the reality of the diverse population playing *World of Warcraft*, the stereotype of the lonely gamer persists. I have been playing *World of*

*Warcraft* so long that I am startled when people ask about the lonely players who are cut off from "real" social life. (See Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Nardi and Harris 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Williams et al. 2006; Bainbridge 2007; DiGiuseppe and Nardi 2007; Nardi et al. 2007; Lindtner et al. 2008 on social aspects of *WoW*.) In fact, I was inspired to write this book at a New Year's Eve party a few years ago when I found myself trying to explain multiplayer video games to my puzzled middle-aged neighbors in Half Moon Bay, California (where we spend vacations). Most have PhDs or law degrees and are generally well informed. But they had encountered only media stereotypes about games centered on themes such as addiction and lonely kids with no friends.

Many players played with friends and/or family members (see Taylor 2003b; Nardi and Harris 2006; Peterson 2007). The game was an extension of their existing social lives. This was true in both North America and China. Nightflower, a 53-year-old mother of seven, explained in an online interview:

my oldest son just started playing last week and i am thrilled! he lives in NC [North Carolina] and we haven't been close for a while . . . but now we talk a lot more ig and irl [in-game and in real life].

One player, who played with two siblings and a nephew, said that they used a voice chat program to talk while they played. It was "like all being in the same room playing for a few hours a day." He had a brother who played with his wife and their 9- and 14-year-old daughters, re-creating the family through the characters. In one of my guilds, a mother of two who homeschooled her children used *WoW* as part of the curriculum to study typing and math. A married couple I interviewed played together and had chosen the character names Toast and Jam to identify themselves as linked. At BlizzCon I met a woman who proudly said she played "with three generations"—herself, her teenage daughter, and her mother. As will be discussed in chapter 9, in China people often played together in Internet cafes with friends from their immediate neighborhood.

Not only do people draw on existing social connections to explore virtual worlds, the virtual world itself is a stimulus to real world interaction. *WoW* was often a topic of offline conversation for people who played together and even for those who played but not together. One player said

that he had gotten his brother to start playing, "... and, as a result we have new things to talk about, like in-game stuff." Another player, introduced to the game by his brother who was several years older, said, "Now we finally have something to talk about."

Study participants commented frequently in the interviews about the importance of socializing. A student at the University of California, San Diego, said:

Well, I'd have to say, you know, getting with people, grouping, following the pack. You kind of get that—you get a nice feeling, like you're part of something. That's what it is.

Another player said:

It's about interaction, it's about hooking up with people, it's about fighting with people. It's about—you know, that's where you build your game from. It's a people game.

And:

This game is like, you know, real people, real talking human beings, you know. We can process, we can talk, we can think. So, you know, mostly it's about talking with people, hanging with people. You kind of get that—it's kind of like traveling the world without traveling the world, basically.

Those who come to the game on their own have ways of meeting new people in an open environment in which players expect to be approached by strangers (Nardi and Harris 2006; see also Brown and Bell 2004). The following chat log shows portions of an hour's play between my priest and a hunter, Delbarth, who formed a party. We approached a cave at the same time. I was on the quest Insane Druids, which required slaying Taneel Darkwood, Uthil Mooncall, and Mavoris Cloudsbreak. Delbarth and I switched from local area chat (the nearby vicinity) to party chat (just those in the formal party) at about 21:38.

1/8 20:59:41.690 To Delbarth: are you doing insane druids?  
1/8 21:02:13.481 Delbarth says: do you want to party up?

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1/8 21:02:20.599 Delbarth has invited you to join a group.  
1/8 21:02:50.556 Delbarth says: what point in the quest are you at?  
1/8 21:03:02.604 Innikka says: starting  
1/8 21:03:12.441 Innikka says: how about you?  
1/8 21:03:24.256 Delbarth says: I have killed two of them —need taneel still  
1/8 21:03:30.935 Innikka says: ok  
1/8 21:03:32.444 Delbarth says: lets give it a go :)  
1/8 21:03:35.112 Innikka says: k

[many monsters are slain, including, finally, Taneel]

1/8 21:38:11.186 [Party] Innikka: ok got taneel!  
1/8 21:38:11.809 [Party] Delbarth: oh yeah!  
1/8 21:38:37.388 [Party] Delbarth: I am done with the quest, but you want to keep going?

1/8 21:38:44.612 [Party] Innikka: yes!

[several monsters later]

1/8 21:41:41.345 [Party] Delbarth: you ok with mana?  
1/8 21:41:46.243 [Party] Innikka: yes  
1/8 21:43:53.959 [Party] Delbarth: DING  
1/8 21:44:00.636 [Party] Delbarth: 30<sup>th</sup> - wooh!  
1/8 21:44:05.665 [Party] Innikka: hurray!

[yet more monsters]

1/8 21:54:00.856 [Party] Delbarth: shall we keep going?  
1/8 21:54:06.858 [Party] Innikka: yes

[Innikka gets one more of the monsters she needs]

1/8 21:55:32.578 [Party] Delbarth: thanks for the healing :)  
1/8 21:56:46.311 [Party] Delbarth: I need to stop for the night - my wife is getting ancy :)  
1/8 21:57:03.302 [Party] Innikka: ok. thanks a lot for helping. and congrats on 30  
1/8 21:57:20.881 [Party] Delbarth: thanks for the help, as well - can't do that dungeon solo, for sure!

The players I encountered had interests beyond *World of Warcraft*. I knew

two players who bowled weekly. Members of Scarlet Raven participated in sports, including skiing, football, deep-sea diving, and river rafting. Others enjoyed offroading, martial arts, photography, international travel, and amateur theatricals. One player built a truck. Another was a professional wrestler who posted his (terrifying) YouTube wrestling videos on the website. Another played in a rock band. One player posted a picture of himself with the caption "Here I am in the middle of mixing mud for laying concrete block at a Habitat House in Georgia." Another served communion at his local county jail, which he jokingly referred to as the "hoosegow." He was involved in outreach activities for female prisoners. Parents in Scarlet Raven put up pictures of their children on the guild website. The general impression I had of many *WoW* players was that they were active people looking for intense, engaging, online experiences that complemented similarly engaging offline activities.

In addition to people with many varied interests, *World of Warcraft* also attracted parents whose lives were circumscribed by shift work and/or young children. I met several young fathers at home tending sleeping children while their wives worked a shift. One of my guildmates sometimes left for several minutes to care for her young children who were watching television or playing together but needed a snack or other attention. As in many online communities, *WoW* had its share of people with disabilities for whom the game provided sociality, challenge, and variety difficult to attain in other venues.

One of the most striking things about *World of Warcraft* was the way it brought together social classes for authentic shared activity. I realized how limited my own social universe was when I began to perceive that I was spending many pleasant hours with people very different than I. One player was a military wife whose husband had been to Iraq three times on the front lines. Another lived on what he called a "hamburger farm," raising cattle in Missouri. Many players worked weekend or late-night shifts. One would logon telling us he smelled of grease from working in his brother's restaurant. A player who had been fired from Home Depot complained that his manager did not appreciate him even though he "did all the heavy lifting." This comment made me feel a little guilty since I use the expression "doing the heavy lifting" jokingly. For my guildmate, the words were not an arch jest but expressed a difficult physical reality. Through voice chat, I experienced varied North American regional accents (those so care-

fully cleansed from the mass media) from places like East Texas, Alabama, West Virginia, and Quebec.

A 21-year-old psychology major one of my research assistants interviewed commented on the diversity of players in his guild and how they had become skilled at designing and maintaining his guild's website.

And most of them [don't do anything technical] for their living; most of them it's just random, you know, MAE [mainstream American English] teachers, and you've got all these crazy, you know, like, bus drivers. People from different backgrounds basically, just doing this amazing thing and they're not even computer technicians. They have no knowledge whatsoever, they just, you know, read the website and they come up with a really cool look or like a really flashy guild forum.

I found the following guild description on the Internet, posted on a guild website.

Our guild is . . . growing daily as people see who and what we are: A group of players who casual Raid with a small core Elite Raid Group. We are all working class, have kids, family or other RL [real life] stuff to distract us from WoW. Afkkids is common for us and no one complains, even when we have to AFK 20 minutes as someone has to put their Kids to bed.

(AFK means away from keyboard. /afk returns a message to anyone who sends a message that the player is AFK.)

The glue that brought people together was the game itself. As a guild master in Scarlet Raven remarked on the guild website:

Basically, Scarlet Raven is one big extended family. Some of us barely know each other. Some of us know each other in real life. Some of us know each other only in game. Some of us have spent years playing together. The one thing we all have in common is that we enjoy WoW and although we may sometimes stumble as a player, as a guild, even as a real life person, what makes Scarlet Raven a success is that we get back up, work out a solution, and we push onwards to the next obstacle. All while maintaining an enjoyable balance of gaming, community, and everything in between.

Some guilds were built around shared characteristics such as a religion or sexual orientation. There were Christian guilds, gay guilds, location-based guilds, family guilds, military guilds, guilds of coworkers, and guilds of professional colleagues. Such guilds tailored play to suit their values. Christian guilds, for example, usually requested that players avoid foul language (such avoidance not being the norm in *World of Warcraft*). While *WoW* has a profanity filter, even with the filter on players still see messages such as “that was f@#\$%\* stupid.” In Christian guilds, no player ever need see such a message, at least not in guild or private chat. A list of Christian guilds at the CGAlliance website (CGAlliance n.d.) included evocative guild names such as God’s Humble Servants, Mustard Seed Conspiracy, Carriers of the Cross, Servants of Faith, WWJD, The Forgiven, The Narrow Path, and Troop Agape.

A spoof at a widely linked website that pokes fun at fundamentalist Christians satirized Christian gamers and the lonely gamer stereotype:

I think the reason so many people are open to hearing about Jesus in the World of Warcraft is because the majority of people who play the game are lonely kids who don’t have any friends. I doubt any of them play sports so you can pretty much guess that there are lots of gay boys and fat little pale-faced Wiccan girls on the servers who hate themselves and escape into virtual characters so they don’t have to deal with their pathetic lives. When they hear that someone loves them, even if it is just the Lord Jesus Christ, they always want to hear more! (LandoverBaptist n.d.)

The spoof playfully twists the characterization of gamers as isolated losers seeking solace in a video game. As more diverse populations take up video games, the notion of the lonely gamer, and games as the last refuge of the socially unfit, becomes parody, satire. My data, and that of others, suggest the fundamental wrongheadedness of the stereotype; instead of a withdrawal into fantasy worlds, we see the extrusion of the worlds into ordinary life as family and friends play together, as players gather in Internet cafes, and as they meet and socialize with others online.

## CHAPTER TWO

# An Ethnographic Investigation of *World of Warcraft*

When I began my study, I had no hypotheses or precise research questions. Unlike research in most academic disciplines, where investigation proceeds according to a scientific procedure involving hypothesis generation and testing, ethnography moves in a “go with the flow” pattern that attempts to follow the interesting and the unexpected as they are encountered in the field. I initiated the research with a desire to satisfy a deeply felt urge of the cultural anthropologist—to journey to a foreign land, to discover and experience the strangeness of a new culture, to find out what the natives are doing and what they think about what they are doing. The impetus to discovery (from the point of view of the discoverer, of course) has fueled anthropology at least since Henry Schoolcraft wrote accounts of Native American tribes 150 years ago. Schoolcraft was the first to systematically record the poetry, legends, and lore of indigenous cultures from Minnesota to the Eastern Seaboard. Longfellow based “The Song of Hiawatha” on Schoolcraft’s publications. As Schoolcraft (1856/1990) wrote in a dedication to Longfellow:

Greece and Rome, England and Italy, have so long furnished . . . the field of poetic culture that it is, at least, refreshing to find, both in theme and metre, something new.

Recently, opportunities for “something new” appear to have foreclosed in anthropology. Anthropologists have documented nearly every culture on earth, and the “primitives” to whom we have been devoted are disappearing

into modernity. The blockage created by diminished opportunities to study cultures untouched by cosmopolitan markets and states has left contemporary anthropology somewhat unsettled. It is not surprising, then, that some turn to what appear to be new cultural forms emerging in virtual worlds. These social milieux offer up a chance to cast an anthropological gaze on fresh sets of natives and their exotic ways (e.g., Miller and Slater 2000; Wilson and Peterson 2002; Golub 2007, 2009; Williams 2007; Boellstorff 2008; Ito 2008; Malaby 2009; Pearce 2009).

Once the anthropologist has located some strangers in a strange land, how does she proceed? Simply by going down the rabbit hole; there are no formulaic plans to follow. As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern wrote:

Ethnography is . . . the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection . . . Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. (2004)

As an example of this style of data collection, I have amassed thousands of pages of chat logs recorded with a game function, /chatlog, which creates a file with a record of all chat in the chat window. I do not always know what I am going to do with the logs, but when a question begins to simmer I have rich data to consult.

The “participatory exercise” of which Strathern spoke is referred to in anthropology as “participant-observation.” The ethnographer observes the culture in which he is situated but also *participates* to varying degrees. In studying *World of Warcraft*, my practice tilted toward the participant end of participant-observation. It would be impossible to penetrate the game without becoming engaged as a player.

Strathern’s commentary builds on the history of anthropology, a discipline devoted to generating deep understandings of human activity and the cultures in which it is embedded. Such understandings require lengthy engagement with social groups and generally involve a good deal of qualitative data. Strathern pointed to the “generation of more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection.” Anthropologists collect an abundance of materials: texts, audio and video recordings, observations, and any and all relevant artifacts. We attend to important events but also

slavishly observe the everyday, the mundane, the boring (although it is not boring to us). People, objects, and events that a journalist would pass over as lacking newsworthiness we find deeply interesting. Since understandings of a culture develop as we collect data, we often cannot make sense of the data until we have “grown up” in the culture at least partially, gaining enough sense to analyze the materials we have accumulated. A journalist, by contrast, must immediately turn out a “story” with coherence and interest. Anthropologists take time to sink into a culture.

Most anthropological fieldwork requires a budget for foreign travel and the necessity to leave home. It often requires living under difficult circumstances. The cost of entering a virtual world is very low—in the case of *World of Warcraft* 50 dollars for the game CDs and 14 dollars a month for the subscription. No research grants or struggles with a foreign language were necessary to initiate the research. Nor was there a need to cope with disturbing food, large insects, filth, dangerous diseases, or homesickness. My entry point to the field site was a computer on my dining room table where I sat in a comfortable chair and played for many hours. And yet this fieldwork was nearly as immersive as the fieldwork I conducted for my postdoctoral research in Western Samoa or Papua New Guinea, where I accompanied my husband for his doctoral research. I typically played about 20 hours a week. I read fewer novels and slept a bit less. In addition to game play, I read my guild’s website nearly every day and spent considerable time reading about *World of Warcraft* on the Internet.

Comforts of home notwithstanding, I grew curious about the largest group of *WoW* players—the Chinese. I traveled to Beijing for a month in August 2007 (no need to suffer: excellent food and a vibrant city) to investigate play in China. *World of Warcraft* was very prominent in the Chinese gaming scene.

Silvia Lindtner, a graduate student, assisted, conducting interviews in both Beijing and Shanghai with the help of a Chinese American assistant, Jui Dai. He Jing and Wenjing Liang, graduate students in sociology and anthropology at Peking University, collaborated with us, providing translation, analysis, and cultural interpretation. In the United States, I conducted interviews with the assistance of two undergraduate students, Nicholas DiGiuseppe and Tony Vu. Vu conducted interviews in the San Diego area and DiGiuseppe in Irvine. Justin Harris, a graduate student, conducted interviews and in-game observations. Stella Ly, a UCI employee, conducted

observations in her guild. Yong Ming Kow, a graduate student, conducted interviews in China and North America on players who write software modifications. Trina Choontanom and Rubin Singh, undergraduate students at the University of California, Irvine, contributed to the research with studies of player customization. With these students, I have generated around 200 formal interviews resulting in thousands of pages of transcripts, as well as participant-observations from our various points of view.

I know far less of play in China than North America. General observations about *World of Warcraft* reflect North American practice unless noted. Most of what I have to say about China is in chapter 9. I sometimes use a quote from a Chinese interview if it expresses a sentiment common to China and North America.

My research methods were the standard methods of anthropology: interviews, observations, participant-observation, informal conversations, and document analysis. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face; I find I learn more when I sit down with someone for an unhurried conversation. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Some interviews were conducted online. The interviews utilized a fixed set of questions, but, like most ethnographic interviews, they opportunistically followed the contours of the conversation. If the study participant said something interesting, the topic was pursued. I also read many *WoW*-related websites, blogs, forums, wikis, and news articles and watched *WoW*-related videos.

How does an anthropologist go about describing and analyzing a field site? There are two strategies. The first is through the application of theory. In this book I analyze *World of Warcraft* using activity theory and the closely related ideas of John Dewey. The second strategy is the accretion of a multitude of details that impart a sense of the everyday texture of experience in a culture. I present the details of the game in descriptions of the game itself, in specific episodes of activity, and through the words of players themselves.

An important part of my methodology in studying *World of Warcraft* was participant-observation. My primary guild, Scarlet Raven, was home to Innikka. Scarlet Raven comprised a diverse group of people including engineers, programmers, students, retail clerks, restaurant workers, a real estate agent, an architect, a truck driver, a machinist, traveling salespeople, a worker at a health spa, a commercial pilot, a bartender, a firefighter, an emergency medical technician, a stocker at a big box store, a city bus driver,

a man who drove a billboard on a truck through a large city, and many others. There were about 200 people in the guild. Most were male, but about 20 percent were female (guild membership fluctuated). Female members included graduate students, a chef, a receptionist, a veterinarian, and a young girl who played with her brother and cousin.

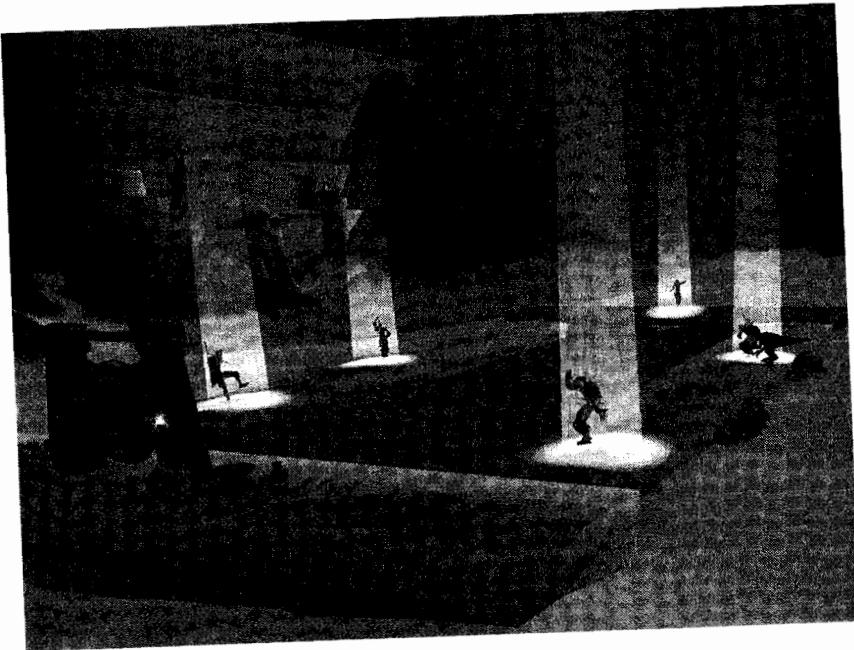
A second guild, Terror Nova (its real name), on the Etrigg server, was composed of people with a connection to games research. Participation in Terror Nova helped me keep up with research and was an occasion to play purely for fun. It was not a site of research. The third guild, which I will call The Derelict (a pseudonym), was a small guild of primarily working-class people, military personnel, and students. Scarlet Raven and Terror Nova were raiding guilds, where players took the game seriously and explored high-end content. They used tools that measure player performance and maintained a competitive atmosphere. The Derelict, by contrast, was a guild with limited raiding. I played there for several months to get a sense of dynamics in a small guild. In December 2008, my own family formed a small guild, the Hoodoos, on the Anatheron server for pwnage and family bonding.

Playing in several guilds was enormously time consuming (but fun!). Innikka was always busy, though my other characters led more circumscribed virtual lives. I did not participate in a “hardcore” raiding guild enforcing a strict schedule of required raiding, so even during the most intense periods of play, I maintained flexibility.

All names referring to guilds, guild members, and characters (except Terror Nova and the Hoodoos) are pseudonyms. All screenshots are from my research in North America and China, or from the Hoodoos, unless noted.

Scarlet Raven, on a North American server, was composed of members primarily from the United States and Canada but also Scotland and Australia. Despite time differences, the Scots and Australians managed to join in many guild activities and to serve in leadership roles. The Canadian presence was strong, as several guild leaders were from both the English- and French-speaking parts of Canada. The Australians and Scots joined Scarlet Raven through North American friends with whom they enjoyed playing.

My guildmates were inquisitive about my research. I told them about it, conducted short interviews online with some members, and posted mes-



The Hoodoos Visit Zul'Farrak

sages on the guild website. I did not meet any guild members offline. My research was not salient in my guild interactions. I hope making this point goes some way toward answering the question anthropologists are often asked: are you perturbing the culture you are studying by your very presence? As far as I can tell, I have caused virtually no perturbations in *World of Warcraft* apart from stimulating some players to reflect a bit more on their play experiences as a result of having been interviewed. I can identify no risks the research posed.

One of the first things an ethnographic investigation requires is finding a way to enter a new culture. In *WoW* that meant finding a guild since my interest was in social life. Landing a spot in a good guild takes some time if a player is not playing with friends or family. As a low-level, ungilded player, it is common to receive invitations to join guilds as they seek new members. Guilds want to expand to replace players who have moved to other guilds or left the game or to balance teams. I accepted my first invitation at around level 20. I spent a few weeks in the guild but did not feel much of a connection to its members. When a personable young player

with whom I had been chatting issued me a guild invitation, I left my guild and joined his. Loro headed a wonderful guild that had several female players, including a social worker, a journalist from the Philippines, and an elementary school teacher, as well as vibrant personalities of both genders. We had a huge amount of fun PvPing, throwing guild parties, and convening guild meetings in which players humorously subverted Loro's efforts to conduct serious guild business.

As so often happens in *WoW* guilds, interpersonal conflict, i.e., drama, reared its ugly head. One day Loro disappeared without a word. The school-teacher took over but then broke up with her boyfriend who had gotten her into the game, and left *WoW*. The guild sadly disbanded.

After that guild came a third, in which again I did not make a good connection to the players. Loro, meanwhile, was still around and had been scouting guilds. He joined Scarlet Raven and got the officers to invite me. More drama surrounding Loro ensued, and he left Scarlet Raven (and then the server). But I found Scarlet Raven an excellent group of people with whom to play and stayed for two years.

Scarlet Raven was a little older and more mature than many guilds. "Mature" is a relative term; you had to be 18 to be in the guild. Even this restriction was only a rule of thumb, and the guild had some younger members who were the children or relatives of older members.

Many guild members were parents with small children. It was not unusual for game play to stop as a player settled an infant who had awakened or took time out to bandage a skinned knee. Part of the guild ethos was that members had real lives, so such actions were to be tolerated politely and patiently. In hardcore guilds, this would not be the case. Many Scarlet Raven members were professionals who traveled; they had little time for play when away and were not always available for group activities—again something that would not be possible in a hardcore guild (see Taylor 2003b; Malone 2007).

The following quote, from a discussion on the Scarlet Raven website, gives a sense of the kinds of materials anthropologists deploy to communicate understandings about a culture. (Spelling and grammar will be unchanged when I quote from websites and chats.)

*WimHong*: Before I got WoW, I had a lot of fun with my PS2, Xbox, Gamecube, and PC games. I loved checking out the latest games, and I

played lots of RTS [real time strategy games] like Dawn of War and Battle for Middle Earth. Since WoW, I ain't bought a damn thing. Battle for Middle earth has both a sequel out now, and an expansion coing out xmas, and i won't buy either. I love Neverwinter Nights 1, had all expansions and tons of downloaded content. I won't buy the new one either. Other games are enticing, but in WoW what you do is persistent. It stays around. You can share your achievements with others. I mean, I heard that Oblivion was a simply awesome game . . . but I can't see the point anymore of playing a game where you increase level, get new cool looking armor and weapons that do neat stuff and you play your game on your own.

Here, I can not only show off my neat new gear that I can use now that I leveled yadda yadda, but I can use it to help your character through a tough [fight], and have a shared experience. The multiplayer experience really is the reason I can't stop playing this game.

Windsong was a reflective, articulate player. He posted regularly on the guild website. He did not "speak for" other players but expressed what I have heard dozens of players express in varying ways. Moreover, this text was addressed to guild members, not to me as an anthropologist.

Methodologically, there was not a great deal of difference between my work on *World of Warcraft* and my previous work. The ethnography involved considerable face-to-face contact in interviews with players and observations of players in homes, dorms, and Internet cafes, so it was not purely virtual. My goals were to understand the natives and try to make sense of their activities, as in any ethnography.

One difference in studying *WoW* was that the research inclined toward the *participant* end of participant-observation. I learned to play the game well enough to participate in a raiding guild. I looked just like any other player. For many practical purposes, I *was* just another player. I could not have studied raiding guilds without playing as well as at least an average player and fully participating in raids. By contrast, when I was walking around villages in Papua New Guinea or Western Samoa, I was obviously an outsider whose identity required explanation. When I investigated technological practices in a neurosurgery operating room, I donned scrubs, sat in the operating room, and looked like a doctor but, thankfully, was not given the opportunity to remove any brain tumors! Online, my *WoW* character appeared as any character, and I was a full participant in game activi-

ties. Pearce (2009) suggested the term *participant-engagement* to describe this style of work in which the researcher is deeply immersed in native practices.

Blending in, however, is not necessarily characteristic of research in virtual worlds; it does not distinctly identify "digital ethnography." In research I conducted in *Second Life* with IBM, my participation as a researcher was made clear to others to the point of having a halo over my character's head to identify my special status. Boellstorff (2008) and Pearce (2009) were identified as researchers in the virtual worlds they studied. It may be more natural to set up shop as an anthropologist in non-game worlds; in a game world, the overwhelming need to *play* dominates interaction much of the time. While it is easy to blend in online, the researcher's position with respect to those being studied depends on the nature of the virtual world and the activities under investigation.

A limitation of my research is lack of knowledge of the culture of Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraft* is a product of that culture, and nearly everything that happens in *WoW* is linked in some way to Blizzard. As of this writing, Blizzard had not opened its doors to ethnographic examination as Linden Lab did (see Malaby 2009). I utilized whatever traces of Blizzard culture I could muster: aspects of the design of the game itself revealed corporate preoccupations, employee posts on official Blizzard forums demonstrated the shaping of corporate-player relations, and BlizzCon was an opportunity to hear what Blizzard movers and shakers had to say in media interviews and panel discussions.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Addiction

Having examined theoretical arguments about magic circles, performativity, and so on, this chapter, and the next two, take up broad themes of gaming that are part of academic discourse but also reach into wider arenas of conversation in the mass media and blogs and forums. I begin with the topic of addiction—a perennial favorite of the media and one which seems to crop up often when people ask me about video games.

Many readers will have encountered the notion of video game addiction in newspaper and magazine accounts. Some may know players they believe to be addicted. Players themselves speak of addiction. How exactly should we think about video game addiction? Dewey provides a useful perspective when he discusses the potential for aesthetic activity to become “overwhelming.” I will use this notion, as well as the work of Seay and Kraut (2007) on “problematic use,” to frame my analysis. I extend Seay and Kraut’s work to encompass social aspects of problematic use.

As discussed in chapter 3, Dewey characterized active aesthetic activity as comprised of pleasurable means, successive phases of activity ending in satisfying completion, and collective expression. The final feature Dewey ascribed to aesthetic activity may help us understand why discourse around video gaming includes the term addiction. Dewey argued that aesthetic activity requires *balance and proportion*—qualities that in some circumstances may readily be lost. The passion that animates aesthetic activity contains within itself a dangerous seed; such passion can transmogrify to an extreme state in which it “overwhelms” us. Dewey (2005) wrote:

There is an element of passion in all aesthetic [activity] . . . [W]hen we are

overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, jealousy, the experience is . . . non-aesthetic . . . [T]he material of the experience lacks elements of balance and proportion. For these can be present only when . . . the act is controlled by an exquisite sense of the relations which the act sustains—its *fitness to the occasion and the situation*. (emphasis added)

Aesthetic activity may become overwhelming in circumstances of particular occasions and relations. The potential for aesthetic activity to devolve into a degenerate form of itself is not an inherent quality of any particular aesthetic activity (such as video gaming) but depends on the specificities of a subject's situation.

Obviously, millions of people play video games and are not addicted. We must reach beyond the artifact of the game itself as an explanation for why some people play to excess. It is easy to forget this simple logic under the influence of sensationalism in media accounts that deliver dispatches on the shocking nature of video games: this player sat at his computer too long and keeled over, that one dropped out of school because he could not concentrate on his studies, another abandoned friends and family for the game (see Chee and Smith 2005; Golub and Lingley 2008). Rettberg (2008) observed, tongue in cheek:

[T]he popular media have used the term [*addiction*] while terrifying us with stories of teenage *World of Warcraft* players (these stories are typically set in China, and like horror movies, the victims are always teens) literally *dying* because they *forgot to eat*.

In media accounts, the video game itself is the malefactor. The stories engender what Cohen (1973) called a "moral panic." As Cohen wrote in his study of Mods and Rockers in 1960s England:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons, emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media . . . Socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.

The notion of video game addiction followed this pattern precisely. In

addition to stories produced by journalists and promulgated by mass media, credentialed experts came forth to denounce video games. Orzack, a clinical psychologist at Harvard, said that she believed 40 percent of *World of Warcraft* players were addicted (quoted in Grohol 2006). Her declaration was widely reported in the media and contributed to the arousal of concern and disquiet about *World of Warcraft* and other video games.

To its credit, the American Medical Association's approach has been more measured. There is no entry for video game addiction in the *American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. For now, the AMA has stated that there is insufficient evidence to declare video gaming addictive (Addiction 2007). However, its members proposed that the American Psychiatric Association assess whether such a diagnosis should be included in the 2012 version of the Manual.

While this determination is being made, we can turn to Seay and Kraut's (2007) research. To avoid the baggage of the word "addiction," they deployed the term "problematic use." Seay and Kraut defined problematic use as game play that displaces important activities such as schoolwork, maintaining friendships, or family activities.

The authors found that players exhibiting problematic use scored low on measures of self-regulation. They argued that lack of self-regulation *precedes* problematic use of video games and that games themselves do not cause problematic use. In a longitudinal survey study of 499 video game users, the authors reported:

[T]he overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicate no elevation in . . . problematic use. This seems to indicate that . . . online gaming is . . . an enjoyable, or at least, benign activity.

This research supports the commonsense notion that problem players bring their problems to the game. As with most things that lead to addiction or problematic use (such as alcohol or overeating), generally the need precedes the object rather than the object creating the need.

"Addiction" is a cultural term in the game community as well as a clinical term used by psychiatrists and psychologists. What do players themselves say about addiction? The term is variably inflected in player discourse. Depending on context, it can be used humorously, to signal membership in an in-group of players (two related uses), or to denote problematic use.

In the following, Mark joked about the “addictive” qualities of *World of Warcraft*:

Mark: I have a really good friend in Germany who actually is another guy that I got into the game.

BN: You’re an ambassador for the game.

Mark: Oh, I’m terrible. I’m like a pusher with crack on these things.

This post from the Scarlet Raven website included a joke about playing *WoW* at work. The word “Addict” was bolded and in blue:

Boss: “So Johnson, what did you accomplish today?”

**Addict:** “Well Sir, I killed over 60 Orc Shaman and Warriors, I got lucky and got a ‘blue’ off a random mob and I leveled! . . . Er . . . I mean, I answered over 60 phone calls, I got lucky and sent off a ‘priority blue’ email and I finished the TPS report.”

Boss: “Very good Johnson! Keep up the good work.”

For players, the term addiction was often used with a positive connotation. If players said they were addicted to *WoW*, it usually meant they had a deep connection to the game and were members of a group of people who understood its pleasures. A video gamer could claim to be an addict, deliberately choosing a strong term to connote enjoyment of the game and its separation from ordinary activities. One of my guildmates once remarked, “If only real life was this addicting.” A college student said in an interview:

[WoW] is fun on many levels, and it’s like a real world because you know you are playing with other real human beings rather than AI [artificial intelligence]. . . . It’s addicting.

On the other hand, players recognized a pernicious side to excessive game play. They used the term addiction to describe players who spent too much time playing. Internet sites provided forums where players, or former play-

ers, could confess their addictions to “Warcrack.” Posts on such sites tended to be somewhat uninformative, enumerating the number of hours spent at the game rather than analyzing why the game involved players so much. But some posters provided insights:

If you make game friends, [playing *World of Warcraft*] is an easy way to waste hours. It’s like hanging out on the corner or in a club, but on a really lazy level. There’s no dressing up, spending money, etc. All of the human interaction for very low cost. And everyone looks so attractive and appealing. Real life is full of faults. The reality is real life can’t compare. Real life is work, plain and simple. (Apadwe n.d.)

This player offered up the same theory as games researchers who describe multiplayer games as third spaces like tree houses or bars (Chee 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Williams 2006; Williams et al. 2006). But the player suggested that playing video games was a “lazy” version of such forms of interaction characterized by the unreality of everyone looking “so attractive and appealing.”

The following post satirized the addicted, lonely gamer stereotype:

I’m 13 and im a girl and play wow about 12 hours a day and I also eat alot. It started with me not having any friends at school, so I got wow because I heard people on there were nice. When I made a bunch of friends I started skipping school to play and eventually failed school. My parents were always drinking and yelling at me and when they were drunk one day I got them to get me broadband. All I did is play wow and eat but I tried to stop. I am a guild leader and I have Six 70’s and I raid every day with three diffrent guilds. I have also begun drinking alot while I play sometimes passing out at the keyboard. And I really want to get better with my life its just the game is so fun and really hard to quit. It’s hard to go back to school because my parents have also started to do crack and usually cant take me, and when they can I am usually in a raid or doing PvP. someone on wow told me about this and suggested I share my story. I play a male character because guys dont like me and think im ugly. (Apadwe n.d.)

As with many stereotypes, there is a grain of truth informing the images and vocabulary the stereotype invokes – in this case the young person with

huge problems who turns to a game for solace. I interviewed a clinical psychologist, Dr. Jane Kingston, who worked with clients whose use of video games fell into the problematic use category. She reported that problems with video games seem to be triggered by existing problems, as Seay and Kraut found, and that it can be difficult to break the cycle. She described a wife who came to her for help because her husband brought his laptop computer to the social events they attended and played games. He did not see anything wrong with his actions. She told me about a young child who resisted his parents' attempts to limit his use of console games. He brought the console to Kingston's office and threw it at his mother in a fit of anger. Kingston said the relationship between the two had been troubled. A high school student played *WoW* to the point of dropping out of school. Neither of his parents cared that he played *WoW* or that he had left school (shades of the satire). Kingston observed that she was not sure, in this case, whether playing *WoW* was the worst thing the teen could have done. He lived in an area in which marijuana was farmed and freely available, but he had not become a doper. She noted that the lack of services to help the young man, whose parents chose to neglect him, meant that he was at risk for activities potentially more destructive than playing *World of Warcraft*.

Problematic use of video games is sensible only in relation to other competing activities (since gaming does not have drastic physical effects). Addiction occurs when actions that produce a feeling of well-being and can be beneficial or benign under most circumstances (drinking alcohol, gambling, exercise, sports) supplant or threaten other vital human activities. A Chinese player said:

Addiction is when you don't do anything else anymore. When you quit everything for the game. The person gives up other things. If you give up a lot of things for the game, then you are addicted.

The husband who took his computer to social outings, the boy who threw the console at his mother, the student who dropped out of school—all were clearly engaged in activities that lacked fitness for the occasion and situation. Dewey wrote of the *relations* sustained by an act, denoting its relationship to the larger context of related activities. It is this relation that must be examined in assessing whether a set of actions is aesthetic or has overwhelmed us.

As Dewey theorized, aesthetic activity is potentially dangerous because of the very quality of passion it carries. How do players manage this danger? I have encountered a few players who, in my opinion, played too much. It is undeniable that for some people *World of Warcraft* supplanted vital everyday activities. But more often I observed players self-regulating as Seay and Kraut described.

Building on the work of Bandura (1999) and other psychologists, Seay and Kraut identified three components of self-regulation: *self-monitoring*, that is, observing how much one is playing; *evaluation against perceived standards*, that is, assessing whether play is excessive in light of other responsibilities (similar to Dewey's notion of balance and proportion); and *self-consequation*, that is, self-administration of reward or punishment based on the outcome of self-monitoring and evaluation.

The following website post by Kel, a Scarlet Raven college student, depicts the three components of self-regulation in the player's own words:

I suspended my account last night, since school has reared its ugly head. I have to focus everything on bringing up my grades over the next month or so. Hopefully I can get my act together and it won't be any longer than that. Good luck, and hope to see you all around the forums!

Kel observed that he was playing too much and it had affected his grades. The self-imposed consequence was suspension of his account. He identified reward and punishment: he would suspend the account and then reward himself in a month with renewed play if his grades improved.

To expand the notion of self-regulation, let us examine how it emerges in, and is shaped by, social activity. The very fact that Kel publicly posted this explanation of his actions is the first indication that his problems were not an isolated psychological phenomenon but an aspect of a shared community predicament. The community should be informed of, and involved in, his problems. The responses to his post demonstrated healthy community response, legitimating his actions and providing emotional support for the difficulties involved.

One guildmate responded:

Gonna miss ya Kel, but School first. No doubt you'll have your grades back up in no time. Drop in and chat with us here when you can. /hug

Another wrote:

Hopefully it all works out for you and you can get back asap!

Aww, now I'm not gonna get my Belt of Blasting for a while.

Hehe, regardless, good luck on your endeavors.

These players recognized and articulated that other activities should take precedence over game play. They provided moral endorsement of Kel's decision, as well as social support in encouraging him to prioritize activities to maintain an acceptable level of performance at school.

The responses were crafted with humor, as in the second poster's feigned regret at the postponement of the Belt of Blasting (an item Kel knew how to make), as well as affection ("/hug") and friendship ("gonna miss ya"). The responses likely eased, at least a little, the austerity Kel imposed on himself. While the invitations to return to the game, and to continue communicating through the website, might seem elements of temptation, they also tied Kel to a community that was clearly telling him to back off the game for awhile, making the admonitions more forceful.

A shared morality, which the first response succinctly expressed as "School first," ratified Kel's decision in the public space of the forum. Such open discussion of a player heading toward problematic use served to make visible to all who read the Scarlet Raven forums the possibility of problematic use, and the guild's moral stance. We may add to Seay and Kraut's formulation a social dimension in which players constructed, through discourse in guild websites, a morality regarding problematic use and a social space in which to express and enact moral principles. This is not to say that all guilds would respond as Scarlet Raven did, but to argue that problematic use finds expression in the collective activity of players and guilds.

Work may also preempt play. The following post by Templeton was offered in the context of several guild members having recently taken breaks from the game:

Ok, ok, so I know that it is officially "against the rules" to have any more folks take a break, but I am afraid that it is time for me to take one. Got a lot of RL stuff going on, with a potential change in jobs, other things that

are taking (and need a lot of man hours) time to make sure that they are taken care of.

My account will stay active, because I do enjoy the game, and love raiding, but I have to spend about 3 weeks focusing on these things to make sure that my experience stays fun, and that I can get these things done.

Look for me in a little bit. I will still check the boards [forums], and feel free to PM [private message] me.

I'll be back soon.

Templeton

A guildmate responded:

Well we will be waiting for ya when you get back! GL [good luck] taking care of things, we do surely understand that RL always comes first. See ya soon!

Another said:

You better damn well be back soon!

-Val

PS. On a serious note, RL > WoW . . . take your time getting things worked out!

Pithy, unambiguous directives established a moral algebra: "RL always comes first" and "RL > WoW." The posts expressed friendship, the second in the form of a playful command to be back soon but with contrapuntal advice in the postscript to take time working things out.

Sapem wrote:

I need to start spending more time with my 16 month old son in the afternoons and weekends so i've decided to take a break from gaming for a while

who knows I might come back in a month or so hopefully, I really enjoyed being with u guys

As with Kel and Templeton, guildmates' responses endorsed Sapem's action; for example, Pennit wrote, "Good decision on priorities. Have fun!"

Sapem, Kel, and Templeton were textbook cases of self-regulation—young adults with the maturity to back away. Younger players sometimes required more external support. Baalzamin, a high-school-age player, wrote the following (slightly incoherent) post:

see you later . . . much probably

yea. . . . lots of stuff going on right now, got in trouble for being truent that made me have bad grades (.38 grade point average) that i got in trouble for. just not going to be on wow for a while. . . . just letting you know.

it came so fast . . . my dad got home shut the internet off took my computer out of my room took my car keys took me down to my mom's and then took my phone. . . . it sucked.

One guildmate responded:

Take a break or quit if ya need, School is much more important than any game and if your grades are slipping then its time to focus on important RL stuff. See ya when you get back.

Another joked but sent a serious message:

I say drop out of school, sell drugs for a living, and play WoW full time . . . err No I dont. Quit screwing your self and get your grades up Bro! Its a video game lol

The responses to the three problematic users were written by different guildmates, but all expressed a common sensibility. All clearly denoted actions deemed appropriate for players spending too much time in *World of Warcraft*.

Problematic use may be mitigated by negotiation with those affected

by a player's actions. Rowena, a graduate student I interviewed, described how her boyfriend would "flake out" on her when they had a dinner date, standing her up because he was playing *WoW*. She negotiated a rule in the relationship in which he would tell her when he would be playing, adding an additional hour to make sure he could fulfill his promise to spend time with her. He accepted this plan to manage game and girlfriend time, and it worked well. The couple later separated over other issues but remained on good terms.

One tank in Scarlet Raven left the game completely under pressure from his fiancée. Months later he returned, saying in guild chat, openly, and with no irony, that he had "my addiction under control." After the absence, he played less frequently and in a more moderate, less competitive way. Previously he had been a raid leader and had always sought the best equipment. Upon returning, his play was more casual.

Sometimes problematic use appeared to stem not from lack of self-regulation but from a vacancy in a player's life. Rowena recounted how her brother Bryce, uninterested in his high school studies, became immersed in *World of Warcraft*. The parents tried everything they could to separate him from the game. He became angry—it was the only time Rowena saw him throw "temper tantrums." She observed that his behavior was to be partially understood as a product of the game being "very motivating," invoking its Skinnerian aspects.

When Bryce went to college, he discovered a love of biology. He reduced his playtime dramatically, finding the balance of which Dewey spoke. Alienation from the high school curriculum created a vacuum in which the stimulation of the game became an attractive choice. Once he moved on to other interests, he had no difficulty regulating playtime.

Often self-regulation is simple; players just know when to stop. Many Chinese players discussed how their *WoW* play changed in response to the scheduling of exams or schoolwork. Typical comments were "Before my exams, I played a lot," "I played more when I did not have exams to study for," "I played a lot during summer vacation last year," and "Now school is going to start and I have nearly stopped playing to prepare."

Players sometimes used the word addicted to describe a playful relation to the game. Cultural terms such as addiction stretch, exaggerate, and distort what they express. But they are not random; they loop back on standard meanings of the words they playfully twist. Addiction in this con-

text connoted not clinical illness but attachment to the game, the forgoing of activities that competed with *WoW* (such as television), and, ironically, freedom in choosing if, when, and how to play. When a player playfully said, "I'm addicted!" he declared his attachment to the game while at the same time signaling, through deliberate, ironic use of a loaded word, that he knew what he was doing. There was a kind of extreme autonomy in pretending to flirt with addiction—staying outside of it while engaging, with passion, an activity a player loved.

What kinds of activities did players forgo when devoting hours to *World of Warcraft*? One thing given up by some (though not all) *WoW* players was television. In the interviews, many players reported that they had stopped watching or had reduced viewing time:

Mark: And, you know, my evenings. I clear time in my evenings. You know, I don't watch TV particularly.

BN: So, have you stopped watching TV, or do you do that less?

Mark: Not as a consequence of *WoW*, but as a consequence of gaming, yes.

On a Blizzard website in which players discussed how *WoW* affected their lives, one poster wrote:

I've met quite a few couples who played together at night, which to me was better than TV together. It's certainly better than one partner viewing porn or entering Second Life. (Second Life n.d.)<sup>1</sup>

Some players reported that they had largely abandoned, or seriously curtailed, exposure to media such as television and books. More research is needed to establish the extent to which *WoW* displaces competing activities (see Bainbridge 2007). Careful investigation is necessary to discover the nuances of new behaviors. For example, players sometimes watched television while playing *WoW*, especially during activities that did not require much concentration (such as fishing).

Players often developed playlists, replacing *WoW*'s music. (I was always aghast when I heard this because I loved the *WoW* sound track.) In addition, many players drank alcohol and smoked marijuana while playing *World of Warcraft*.

*Warcraft*. I was alerted to this early on by my undergraduate students and began to notice guild and character names that clearly pointed to substance use. Players often spoke of drinking and smoking while playing. In guild or party chat they joked about the drinks they were mixing or how many beers they had had or talked about paraphernalia such as bongs. I mention these activities to propose that more research is needed. The level of escape or stimulation, or some other dimension, attained by immersion in a video game, layered with the altered consciousness of drugs or alcohol, suggests not necessarily addiction but the construction of a complex experience achieved by artful composition of a heterogeneous mix of technical and organic resources. This is not to say that drunken facerolling is a sophisticated form of play, but to indicate that the subtleties of the magic circles into which we propel ourselves are not yet understood.

Turkle (1984) spoke of the "holding power" of video games, observing (1998):

The term addiction is most usefully saved for experiences with substances like heroin, which are always dangerous, always bad, always something to turn away from.

I think, though, that we must leave open the possibility that addiction, or problematic use, perplexes because it may arise when we are overwhelmed by the passion of activities we are deeply attached to, which, on their own, are not "always bad." It is precisely the regulation of such activities that engages public discourse, as well as private anxieties about friends and family members who appear to be overwhelmed. The potential for positive aesthetic experience to overreach itself into undesirable states of excess entails an ambiguousness with which we continually wrestle.

It seems important to question rhetorical moves that designate some activities as worthy of moral panic while leaving others aside, for example, calling out video games as addictive while giving obsessive sports fandom a free pass even though such fandom may affect marital or family life. Why do politicians (on a fairly regular schedule it seems) demonize rock music while ignoring elaborate supports for activities, such as gambling, which are, in some cases, ruinous to families?

Whether we entertain notions of problematic use or addiction, normative questions follow. Is playing *World of Warcraft* better than competing

activities such as watching television or viewing movies or reading books? How does *WoW* compare to a steady diet of romance novels or frequenting the sleazier parts of *Second Life*? What if a player (like Bryce) has not developed other interests? Does *WoW* prevent people from getting dead drunk? Players need at least some cognitive capacity, so even though they may play and drink the game could provide a moderating influence. *WoW* might even have unusual redeeming social value; one member of my guild, a felon with several convictions for car theft, said that playing *WoW* kept him from returning to prison.

Just what should people be doing instead of playing games? The notion of video game addiction provokes as much moral as clinical inquiry. There is no normative answer my investigation can suggest, but I hope it brings forward discussion of what it is that people are giving up to play games, the vacancies in their lives they may be attempting to fill, levels of stimulation they appear to be seeking, and how we might think about ways to intelligently assess the impact of video gaming on the larger life of the culture.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Theorycraft and Mods

This chapter examines *WoW*'s capacity to stimulate participatory activity outside the game, using the materials of the game in novel, innovative ways. Arenas of such engagement include machinima production (Lowood 2008), fan art, fan fiction, and the development of knowledge bases such as Thottbot that compile game statistics and player commentary. These activities are not unique to *WoW*; they connect to a larger movement fostering user-generated content (see Kucklich 2004; Jenkins 2006; Pearce 2006; Yee 2006; Postigo 2007; Ito 2008; Kendall 2008). This chapter investigates two *WoW*-related activities I found particularly fascinating: theorycrafting and modding.

## Theorycraft

The encoded rules of video games are known as “game mechanics.”<sup>1</sup> Game mechanics specify outcomes as rules are invoked—what happens when you approach a monster many levels higher than your character, which elixirs can be taken in combination, how often Illidan drops the Twin Blades of Azzinoth. Some were discoverable through ordinary play, but others required systematic analysis. “Theorycrafting” is the discovery of rules that can not be determined through play. *WoW* came with almost no documentation, and while Blizzard employees sometimes answered questions on official forums, in general the absence of documentation left many juicy problems for theorycrafters to solve.

A well-known American website, Elitist Jerks, hosted theorycrafters’ technical discussions of *WoW* game mechanics ([elitistjerks.com](http://elitistjerks.com)). Interested

players explored subtleties of game mechanics, plumbing the depths of *WoW* minutiae. The following is a theorycrafting analysis from the Elitist Jerks that investigated the mechanics of a small temporary helper (or “pet”) called the Shadowfiend. Priests could summon a Shadowfiend, which lasted for only 15 seconds. The Shadowfiend did some damage and restored mana, a quantity necessary for spell casting that was depleted as spells were cast.

A poster wrote:

has anyone done a rigorous analysis of Shadow Fiend mechanics?

If so, can someone point me in the general direction?

Known:

- (1) Pet does shadow dmg [damage] and is enhanced by shadow target debuffs
- (2) Pet returns mana at 2.5x dmg done

Easy to figure out:

- (1) How many “swings” per pet lifetime

Hard to figure out:

- (1) How does pet dmg scale on target mobs from 68 thru 73?
- (2) What percentage of player shadow damage benefits the pet?
- (3) What is the crit pct?

The 5min cooldown on the spell makes it very difficult to exhaustively test by yourself.

Is there any interest out there in a group effort?

If we share enough data points (target level, min/max crit/non-crit, player +shadow) we should be able to figure it out . . .

Another poster responded:

I'd be happy to help out, as I'm curious myself . . . There's one thing that really annoys me about Shadowfiend: it seems to spend a significant amount

of time moving when cast on a really big mob (Gruul). It seems to appear near the middle of Gruul's model, then move to the outside before it starts attacking. That's probably 500–800 mana lost while it moves.

And another added:

I guess we need a little more info:

Target Level

Target Debuffs: CoS, SW stack, Misery

Num Attacks

Num Crits

Min/Max for both Non-Crit and Crit

Player Shadow +Dmg

Am I missing anything?

Without worrying too much about the intricacies of the Shadowfiend, the posts demonstrate that players played a game about the game in which they attempted to figure out the game's own machinations. Technically oriented players designed quantitative experiments, performed tests, analyzed the results, published them online, and worked with one another to solve puzzles of game mechanics.

The Shadowfiend analysts were reflexively “remaking the material of experience,” in Dewey's terms, by using observations about their own play (such as the movement of the Shadowfiend) to create new experience and understandings. This activity was conducted in a collective context through shared analysis of game mechanics. The first poster invited others to help him conceptualize the problem and collect data. Subsequent posters responded, validating that the first poster had raised an interesting issue, then expanding his formulation by enumerating further necessary variables. All agreed to collect and share data.

A softer form of theorycraft utilized game statistics to predict which gear would be most effective. Player-created websites analyzed and recommended gear for each class. At dwarfpriest.com, for example, the Dwarf Priest wrote:

I enjoy that *World of Warcraft* is a game with various dynamics and mechan-

ics. It keeps the game from being too one-dimensional. However, I do regret that there is so much work that has to go in to truly understanding these mechanics. The most frustrating thing for me is how little information Blizzard actually gives us about certain things (such as threat and resistances). Our knowledge in many areas is the product of extensive player testing, and can change at any time, without notice. (Dwarfpriest.com)

The Dwarf Priest (who identified herself as a woman in her midtwenties), found hardcore theorycraft a bit taxing but enjoyed devising metrics with which to measure gear to predict its effectiveness for various priestly activities.

One of her accomplishments was a formula that weighted gear statistics. The formula was applied to each piece of gear to produce a rank ordering of all related gear. For example, the following is a partial list of rank-ordered priest-chest healing gear showing score, name, and where the gear was obtained.

Chest:

**201.50** - Sympathy *Naxxramas - Sapphiron* (heroic)

**201.20** - Valorous Robes of Faith *Naxxramas - Four Horsemen* (heroic)

**196.52** - The Sanctum's Flowing Vestments *Obsidian Sanctum - Sartharion* (heroic)

**194.58** - Blanketing Robes of Snow *Eye of Eternity - Malygos* (heroic)

**193.66** - Robes of Mutation *Naxxramas - Noth* (heroic)

**179.76** - Heroes' Robes of Faith *Naxxramas - Four Horsemen* (heroic)

**169.34** - Spellweave Robe *Tailoring BoE*

**167.43** - Digested Silken Robes? *Naxxramas - Maexxna* (heroic)

The Dwarf Priest explained:

This list was created using stat weights of all priest-healing stats and summing them to get the item scores. Items were then ranked according to their scores.

The stat weights used were:

0.74 Intellect  
0.54 Spirit  
0.35 Haste  
0.15 Crit  
1.00 MP5  
0.60 Spellpower

(Dwarfpriest.com)

While players might disagree with certain stat weights (for example, I valued Crit more than the Dwarf Priest), the articulation of the formula enabled players to evaluate rankings and assess how items might work for their play style.

Theorycrafting is pretty serious analytical activity. With real math! Might it have pedagogical value? I have not seen research on this question, but it links to the work of education researchers Steinkuehler and Chmiel (2006). They studied the development of “scientific habits of mind” through game activities in *World of Warcraft*, examining discussion on a Blizzard forum devoted to customizing the druid character class. They found that the top three “habits” used to analyze customization were “social knowledge construction,” “building on others’ ideas,” and the “use of counterarguments.” While I see these practices as characteristic of broad critical thinking skills, and not as distinctively scientific, they do suggest ways in which gamers might engage skills very much like those we are supposed to learn in school.

Steinkuehler and Chmiel’s list of habits also included “pragmatic understanding of theory,” “theory-data coordination,” “coordination of multiple results,” and “reasoning through uncertainty”—that are indeed scientific.

The gamers in their study did not engage these particular scientific

practices at all. But theorycrafters did. As we saw in the Shadowfiend experiments, theorycrafters conducted analyses in which they coordinated multiple results, used theory pragmatically, reasoned through uncertainty, and coordinated theory and data.

Claims about scientific reasoning in gaming raise the issue of where and how such reasoning is developed. While Steinkuehler and Chmiel (see also Steinkuehler and Duncan 2008) were optimistic about the potential of games to improve “science literacy” in educational contexts, the broad skills engaged by players on the druid forum, as well as theorycrafters’ analytical and technical skills, were brought to gaming from other contexts, even if they were exercised, practiced, and sharpened through engagement with *World of Warcraft*. This is not to say that games do not have a role in a school curriculum but to ask whether a student who did not have a sense of, for example, how to use counterarguments, could develop that sense in a gaming-centric curriculum. Are such skills better learned in other arenas and then honed through gaming activity? Can they be directly induced by gaming? In order to establish curricular goals, it is critical to answer these and other questions opened by research on gaming and education.

Seed, a historian, included games in her undergraduate classroom to teach the history of European expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At first she deployed commercial games with historical themes, but subsequently moved to a method in which students designed their own games (Seed 2007). She particularly liked that game design enabled her to teach students that history is not a set of facts but an interpretive activity concerned with historical contingency. As she said:

In order to teach students to design games, I had to teach them how to think about contingency, likely alternative outcomes of events. In this way, the students themselves were coming up with alternative paths that history might have taken had a particular path been followed.

Seed’s pedagogy, as well as theorycrafters’ deployment of scientific reasoning, suggests that at least some curricular uptake of gaming might center not on game play but on activities in and around games such as game design and analysis of complex game mechanics (see also Kafai 1995).

## Modding

*World of Warcraft* is one of many games that allow players to create and install software modules—called modifications, mods, or addons—to add new functionality (Kucklich 2004; Postigo 2007; Whitehead et al. 2008). A famous video game mod evolved into the game *Counter-Strike*, the best-selling game of its genre. Originally a modification of the game *Half-Life*, *Counter-Strike* established that contemporary video games could and should enable modding.

Modding did not start with *Counter-Strike*; it goes back at least to 1961 when students MIT developed *Spacewar!* on the DEC PDP-1. Modding continued into the 1970s with games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Jerez 2007) and may have even earlier roots in activities such as performance tuning PCs (turning up clock speed and the like) or the practices of automotive enthusiasts who rebuild vehicles in configurations such as lowriders or choppers (Willis 1978). Modding in games encompasses a range of activities, including the development of a whole new game (such as *Counter-Strike*); retexturing character models to change their appearance; and, as in the case of *World of Warcraft*, altering the user interface.

*WoW* modding was limited; the game provided a small hatch through which end user content penetrated the product. Players could not change game terrain, character appearance, the behavior of nonplayer characters, character class abilities, or quests (see Whitehead et al. 2008). But even with these limits thousands of *WoW* mods were available for free download on the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Mods were maintained by their developers, requiring updates as Blizzard issued patches. Most players did not write mods, but there was enough technical mastery in the player community to create mods propagated to millions of players. The black box was thus not wholly closed; it permitted entry of small but significant bits of player experience to be codified and incorporated into the game. Not all players used mods, but those who did had a wide choice; considerable customization was possible.

Mods were created by players who enjoyed games and generated ideas for customizing play. We interviewed Karl Isenberg, a founder of the *Cosmos* mod website, one of the earliest *WoW* modding sites.<sup>3</sup> He said that he created mods when he had “a good idea.”

BN: So where do you get these good ideas?

Karl: I don't know. Either from the community—someone says, "Hey, I wish there was an addon that did this." Or, an addon where I look at it and say, "Oh, I wish it did this." And so either I modify it, or make my own addon that does it. Or just something off the top of my head.

Generally, modders wanted to explore new directions and deepen their connection to the game. Isenberg said that he started creating *WoW* modifications when he attained the first level cap of 60:

So after I hit 60, so after I hit the initial cap, I started looking for even more things to do with the game. And so I got into modding and my first addon was, like, a leet-speak translator [a translator for player-coded words].

Mod authors usually began modding for fun. Some then realized the economic potential of their labors and collected donations or developed "premium" versions of their mods. Sites that compiled and distributed mods generated revenue from advertising and might eventually be sold to larger companies.

Most mod authoring, however, was a labor of love—"an entertainment" in Isenberg's words. Isenberg described a modder he knew:

He's pretty stinking smart and he writes things just because he likes playing with new features. So he does theoretical tests like proof of concepts on various new features or things that haven't been done before.

The authors of some of the most popular *World of Warcraft* mods posted the following on their website.

If you would be interested in working on some of the most used projects in *World of Warcraft*, please feel free to contact us . . . Unfortunately this isn't a "job" for us, it's what we do in our free time, so we aren't able to offer monetary compensation. Our primary goal is to get the sites to a self-sustaining state, where they pay for themselves, and don't require us to pull out the checkbook. (ctmod.net)

CTMod claimed over 100 million downloads—an astonishing figure for any software.

Isenberg said that *Cosmos* generated only about a thousand dollars in the three years he was affiliated with it, which was used for server costs and related expenses. He explained:

There's a group that is sort of mod-centric and theoretical and analytical about perfect mods and what's the best way to write things. And then there's people that are trying to make money . . . And they are not entirely separate, but sometimes you go from one to another.

Modders sometimes felt ambivalent about users of their mods, finding many woefully unsophisticated. Isenberg said:

So there is a learning curve to using mods, and if you can't figure that out then I don't really want to let you use them. Like, I'd rather you don't use them because it saves me work . . . My care meter has gone down over the years.

However, he admitted that part of the reason to distribute mods on the Internet, and not just write them for a few friends, was "fame." He began:

You share because I mean, the same reason the Open Source community shares. You share because you either think it's the right thing to do, or some people liked your mods so instead of responding to a bajillion emails about them, you post it so they can just download them.

After a pause, he said, with perfect comic timing:

Do you like watching download counts? I love watching download counts.

We laughed about the anonymous "fame" measured in download counts. Many modders cared about the size of their audience and used quantitative tools to count downloads. Isenberg said watching download counts was "a fulfilling thing." (See Scacchi 2004; and Kelty 2008 on similar Open Source dynamics.)

Mods are protected by copyright but not software patents (an expensive, complex process beyond the resources of modders). Blizzard was thus free to incorporate features based on mods, and indeed *WoW* contained many features that first appeared as player-created mods.

We asked modders how they felt about the uptake of their mods directly into the commercial software (Kow and Nardi 2009). On the one hand, modders were deeply flattered, but on the other they no longer had their mods to care for. We did not speak with anyone who felt ripped off or exploited. They simply missed their babies.

What exactly did *World of Warcraft* mods do? Their primary functions were to reduce player effort, make visible invisible parts of the game, enable information sharing, aid players in coordinating with one another, and capture aspects of play history. As discussed in chapter 4, mods did not, in every case, improve player experience. But many mods filled obvious gaps in *WoW*'s design and allowed players freedom to customize the game as they wished.

Mods were useful in part because *World of Warcraft* was so information intensive. Players improved performance through knowledge of tiny but numerous facts about the game, the management of multiple character and equipment statistics, and attention to rapid state changes during battle.

Mods enhanced these abilities by displaying information about facts and variables not visible in *WoW*'s standard user interface. One of the first mods many players downloaded showed the coordinates of the game geography. Because the geography was huge, it was often difficult to know where to find a particular NPC or an item required to complete a quest.

Mods helped players keep their gear and materials organized, revealing how many empty slots were available in the bags that contained a player's equipment and other paraphernalia. Mods showed how soon equipment would have to be repaired. They allowed players to switch equipment with a single key press (it was common to have multiple sets of equipment for different game activities).

Mods enabled players to redesign the user interface to reflect personal preferences. Some players constructed interfaces with the complexity of airplane cockpits while others chose a minimalist style with a few simple windows and buttons. One player I met described a setup with four monitors that he used to display the output of dozens of mods. (He was playing the interface!)

During challenging encounters, players tracked rapid state changes in multiple variables related to players and monsters. Mods showed the state of variables, such as the duration of temporary magic spells or curses, or the amount of aggro a character was generating. A popular mod displayed the characters that were the current target of a set of monsters in group play—functionality that Blizzard eventually incorporated into the game. Some mods triggered visual or auditory alarms, useful in fast-paced group play.

One heavily used mod, Gatherer, remembered where a player had collected herbs and mineral ores, marking the player's world map so he could return to the same spots on future gathering expeditions. Another popular mod, Auctioneer, collected data about Auction House transactions, allowing players to quickly scan prices, suggesting which items were under- or overpriced and proposing reasonable minimum bids and buyout prices. I did not use this mod, but I usually knew when I had underpriced something as it sold immediately, almost certainly to someone using Auctioneer. Mods, then, affected not only players who used them but players who did not.

Auctioneer software supported collaborative information practices; its information was partially accessible to all players in a guild, even those who did not have Auctioneer downloaded. A player could type, for example:

? Mystical Mantle of the Whale

into the guild chat window and Auctioneer would scan guildmates' Auctioneer databases and whisper information on the pricing of the item. If a player needed only pricing information (and not the other services Auctioneer provided), he could take advantage of collective information without having to download, troubleshoot, and reinstall the mod after a patch. Guild use of Auctioneer generated an efficient collective resource, removing the necessity for reduplication of software management effort.

This innovation strikes me as potentially valuable in many contexts, a possible adaptive potentiation, in Sutton-Smith's terms, that may prove useful outside the arena of play. Small increases in productivity scale—across employees or members of an organization—to measurable effects. Labor is divided so that instead of every individual managing many software modules each manages a few, sharing the information they produce. The labor of software management is stretched across the collectivity, resulting in time savings.

Auctioneer was not an isolated instance of such information sharing. Gatherer had an option to mark the player's map with the locations of minerals and herbs collected by others in the player's guild. In this case the player needed to have Gatherer downloaded but did not need to actually visit each of the nodes to mark their locations.

Gatherer announced when a guildmate visited a node—an interesting form of mutual activity awareness. Awareness mechanisms have been identified as critical for effective collaboration (see, e.g., Heath and Luff 1991; Gutwin and Greenberg 1998; Tang et al. 2001; Begole et al. 2002). Gatherer offered occasions for light conversation ("Illy is stealing my flowers!"); such moments engendered social bonding and supported collaborative work (see Nardi 2005).

Certain *WoW* mods, then, were distinctively communitarian, ideologically shaped to assert the primacy of information sharing, making available information logged into databases, and opening group members' activities to the gaze of others. While the discussion of certain mods in chapter 4 was somewhat critical, the communitarian mods seemed to move the player community toward generous sharing.

As players added mods, a feeling of empowerment grew, a sense of styling the game to personal tastes. Zaq and Jacquii, both rogues, conversed in guild chat:

Zaq: Jacquii, LazyRogue is a Mod i use. U can write ur own script to attack certain ways and react to certain situations. I use it because i find it fun to tweak my script and troubleshoot what doesnt work and what works for me. I dont have much script writing skills, so this is a fun way to learn something and understand how things work.

Jacquii: cool ty [thank you]

In everyday life, Zaq was a bartender. He learned to write simple scripts that he could "tweak" and "troubleshoot," gaining a sense of the possibilities of computational technology in a way that he described as "fun." Zaq modified his play experience according to his own personality, discovering how he liked to play his character through experiments with LazyRogue. He shared his knowledge and enthusiasm with Jacquii, enabling her to learn more about how to customize and empower her character.

When I discovered mods, I was surprised that Blizzard allowed such experimentation with its software. Wouldn't it break? Wouldn't players be able to hack *World of Warcraft*? How could such a complex software system be opened to absolutely anyone who wanted to write a mod?

The game was opened through a narrow, regulated channel.<sup>4</sup> Mods did not include programs working outside the *WoW* folder in which they were installed, nor did they run on their own outside the folder. Human governance was also in effect; Blizzard monitored mods, assessing whether they were consistent with its philosophy of play. Such oversight enabled players to freely experiment without altering the game in ways that would distort player experience as Blizzard had codified it.

An instance of oversight occurred on December 6, 2006, when Blizzard issued a patch that disabled many mods to which *World of Warcraft* players had become accustomed. One such mod was Decursive, used by certain classes to remove "debuffs" including curses, diseases, and disempowering magic spells. Decursive automatically looped through afflicted players, requiring only a single key press to cure everyone in a party. Blizzard felt this made decursing too easy and that such mods were changing the nature of *World of Warcraft*, improperly diminishing its challenge.

After the patch, Decursive no longer worked. But the author rewrote it so that, while it could not remove debuffs with one key press, it was still easier than *WoW*'s standard user interface which required players to select each affected player with the mouse and then click on the appropriate decursing spell. The new Decursive cut this work in half, combining selection and removal of the debuff.<sup>5</sup>

With Decursive, the modding community had disrupted *World of Warcraft*, taking it in directions Blizzard deemed unsuitable. Blizzard responded to protect the core gaming experience in conformance with its vision, eliminating mods that failed to preserve what it conceived as desirable play experience. Such a model of governance arguably calibrated diverse elements, taking account of user experience while at the same time fore-stalling potential difficulties of more sweepingly democratic approaches. The very term "addon" suggests the relative contributions of player community and designed product; mods were "added to" an existing world. Both Blizzard and modders used, and accepted, this term.<sup>6</sup>

Having a vibrant modding community was an asset for Blizzard. Over time, Blizzard acknowledged and appeared to appreciate the modding com-

munity. However, initially there was little support for modding, although mods were permitted (Kow and Nardi 2009). In 2004 the Blizzard website contained a post that read:

There is no official support for modifying the *WoW* interface. If you break it, you get to keep both pieces :)

This lack of support suggests that Blizzard did not view modding as a source of free labor (see Postigo 2007). Blizzard slowly warmed to the modding community, in part due to the efforts of an employee named Sam Lantinga (better known by his alias, Slouken), who took it upon himself to participate in the IRC channel inhabited by *WoW* modders (Kow and Nardi 2009). In 2004, modders were told they could “keep both pieces,” but by the time of BlizzCon 2008 Blizzard and the modding community enjoyed cordial relations. At the “UI and Mods” session, a panelist addressed modders in the audience, saying:

This is a really great community that you guys are part of.

He commended the contributions of modders in extending the game in ways that Blizzard could not:

We can't make hundreds of options, but you can.

Another panelist said:

We'd like to thank the addon community for everything they've done.

Modding is part of a larger movement of participant production on the Internet in which people create content simply because they want to. Ito (2008) detailed the activities of amateurs, including the production of online comics, music, videos, and anime. Like modders, purveyors of these arts sometimes transformed their efforts into paid work, although generally their activities centered on creativity and sharing as end rewards (Ito 2008).

Modding establishes an ethos that allows for a more open relationship between people and technology. While sustained by a great many technolo-

logical features and processes beyond the reach of players, *World of Warcraft* represents a family of technological artifacts that open the black box at least partially, trying out alternative principles of human engagement with technology that enable the incorporation of direct user experience. *World of Warcraft*, and, more broadly, a range of video games, allow players to intervene and modify some of the ways games are played. In this respect, games such as *WoW* are to some degree reflexive, allowing the experience of playing to feed back on the game and aspects of the software through which it is enacted.

Theorycrafters and modders approached *World of Warcraft* as an occasion for opening up new play experiences, for moving beyond reproducing play in predictable ways. They discovered the freedom to alter play, to dwell in what Dewey called “an attitude of freedom.” Mods were reshaped as players responded creatively, engaging a readiness to “look at an addon and say, ‘Oh, I wish it did this.’” Theorycrafters were roused to action when pondering such enigmas as the puzzling movement of the Shadowfiend. Remaking the material of experience began with an idea for a mod that occurred to a player or a theory question that piqued interest. It blossomed in a social context as discussions took place in chat channels and Web forums. The invitation to enrich and deepen experience through reflections on play enabled players to find satisfactions in doing “even more things with the game.” Theorycrafting and modding are embodiments of Dewey’s articulation of aesthetic experience as recursively generating new aesthetic experience:

Works of art that are not remote from common life . . . are . . . marvelous aids in the creation of such a life.

The game itself is the “work of art not remote from common life”; its rules ensure that overall artistic excellence is not compromised while at the same time the capacity to alter rules in controlled ways is designed into the system.

## Gender

From the moment one creates a character and must choose its gender, gender is always present, in varying ways, in *World of Warcraft*. This chapter examines how gendered experience in *World of Warcraft* was constructed in two distinctive ways: through patterns of discourse and through the design of the game. I argue that discourse practices created a “boys’ tree house” but that the game itself countered with surprisingly feminine, domestic nuances.

The discussion is based on my participation in several guilds on North American servers. I believe my data are descriptive of gendered practice in most North American guilds. However, specialized guilds such as Christian guilds, gay guilds, guilds of professional colleagues, and so on, may enforce different rules of discourse. I eagerly await future analyses of gendered practice in such guilds, as well as those from other parts of the world. My observations on discourse in battlegrounds, general chat, and other public chat channels were consistent across the servers on which I played.

### The Boys’ Tree House

[13:53] Dan: So how did you get into this game?

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: my husband

[13:54] Dan: How old are you by the way?

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: 39

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: I am a mother of 2 girls

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: and a wife of 21 yrs

Many female players, such as Mrs. Pain (interviewed by an undergraduate in instant messaging), found their way to *World of Warcraft* through husband, boyfriend, brother, cousin, or male friend. Other female gamers had been playing competitive video games for years and played *WoW* as one of many games. A few female players were introduced to *WoW* by female friends or relatives.

What did female players find when they stepped into *World of Warcraft*? Competitive video gaming is typically associated with males, and *World of Warcraft*, despite the presence of a healthy minority of females, was a male-dominated space. It was not an unfriendly dominance; female players were talked to, listened to, included, and aided, just as male players were. But the social space was maintained as one in which males set the rhetorical tone. Sexualized, homophobic language was normalized in text and voice chat (although stopping short of what would probably take place in a men’s locker room). Male players casually mentioned things like blow jobs and buttsex. They spoke of raping, or being raped by, mobs or players in battlegrounds and arenas. They used words such as douche bag, pussy, cunt, and pimp. The term gay was a generically derisive (and liberally invoked) adjective. Males called players fag, faggot, or homo if displeased or as a joke. Male players sometimes taunted other males by referring to them as “little girls.”<sup>1</sup> I label this discourse “male” because it was primarily (though not exclusively) males who engaged it.<sup>2</sup>

Female players, numerically a minority, and more conservative in speech, were, I argue, a presence in a boys’ tree house.<sup>3</sup> Discourse was led by males; they used sexualized and homophobic language more often than females and language that female players nearly universally avoided such as mentions of rape and the use of words like cunt and homo. However, the boys’ tree house in *WoW*, while male oriented, was a complex space; males maintained control through the use of aggressive language, but the tree house allowed females more latitude in speech and action than everyday life typically does—latitude they often leveraged and enjoyed.

My observations on male rhetorical practice in *WoW* are consistent with those of Golub (2007) who studied a North American raiding guild. He reported a typical incident of sexualized language:

At one point, one [raider’s] microphone sent some noise across the channel. The [male] raid leader asked . . . “John . . . is that a dick in your mouth?”

Golub (2007) was quite clear on the use of masculinist talk in *World of Warcraft* and that such talk was “transgressive” with respect to the larger culture. Apart from this work I have found few analyses that highlight the casualness and prevalence of this style of discourse which I encountered everywhere in *WoW*.

Kavetsky (2008) studied gendered language in a raiding guild. She reported:

[T]he guild's leadership emphasizes a “family-friendly” atmosphere—a trait noted by virtually all those interviewed. This does not mean that there are no off-color jokes (these are predominantly men in their twenties and thirties, after all), but rather reflects an attempt to create an environment where a variety of people feel comfortable.

Kavetsky did not explain what kinds of language the guild accepted from “men in their twenties and thirties.” She reported that males used language that females did not use but was silent on the nature of the language and its impact, naturalizing it with the parenthetical “men in their twenties and thirties, after all.” Her topic was gendered language in *World of Warcraft*, so we might expect analysis of how male joking was handled within the “family-friendly atmosphere.”<sup>4</sup>

Discourse inhabited its own sphere in *World of Warcraft* in text and voice chat. The free expression permitted in these channels enabled males to establish rhetorical practice as they liked. Voice chat was, of course, completely outside any means of official discipline, and while game masters took action when racial slurs in text chat in public channels were reported (which happened rarely), there was little they could (or wanted?) to do given the much higher prevalence of sexualized, homophobic terms.

The following is an anecdote that I believe captures the way in which rhetorical practice was deployed to position women in the tree house.

One evening I was playing in a 25-man pug composed of a core of players from one guild and an assortment from other guilds, including me, to make up a late-night run. After a wipe, as we were regrouping, the raid leader asked in voice chat if there were any real life females present apart from the one he knew. Though it was clearly a setup, I answered (for Science of course) “Ya, me, Inni, I'm female.” The raid leader said he had gotten

a fortune cookie at lunch in which he was promised a wish. “Inni, would you please immediately email me naked pictures of yourself?” he asked. I replied, very truthfully, “I'm pretty sure you don't want pictures of me.” He said, with mock sadness, “Ah, I knew I would not get the wish the fortune cookie promised.”

No one commented on this little exchange or laughed. Females were implicitly asked to agree to the condition that they were participating in an activity in which males were the dominant gender. The other woman in the raid was in my guild. She was a skilled player and had been accepted as a member of the late-night group. I was being tested and put on notice that the guys were in charge.

When such an event occurs, there are two choices. The player can play along and continue to play the game or she can leave. There is no opportunity for reasoned discourse or a way to win through humor. No matter how clever a response a player might come up with, the mere asking of the question and her presence as a small minority ensure that she has been called out as the exception.<sup>5</sup>

And anyway, it was just a joke! Vandenberg (1998) observed of play that “The ease with which the real can be rendered not real, by the simple signal, 'This is play,' reveals the contingency and fluidity of the social construction of reality.” Such fluidity is a means by which behaviors in which one group acts out at the expense of another can be rendered unaccountable.

Mrs. Pain reported that her daughter refused to play:

[13:56] Mrs. Pain: my daughter tried playing but she thought the players were too rude

[13:56] Mrs. Pain: I have certain ppl [people] I play with

[13:56] Mrs. Pain: and being an adult I could handle myself

Mrs. Pain accommodated to “rudeness” by cultivating an in-game social network and through the resource of her maturity. Her daughter made the decision to not play.

In the workplace or classroom, in family activities, and in many mixed-gender venues, the kind of masculine discourse that was utterly normal in *World of Warcraft* would not be permitted. Everyday life is rife with male dominance, but it is generally hidden under a welter of coded lan-

guage, polite niceties, and superficial civility. In-game, such dominance was embraced, exaggerated, and given free expression in coarse masculine language.<sup>6</sup> Vandenberg (1998) noted that in play:

It is thrilling to transform the real to the not real, to journey into forbidden areas of darkness behind the public mask of conventionality, and to become aware of the freedom to do so in the process.

This discussion raises many questions for which I do not have answers. Why did males find it amusing to engage in sexualized, homophobic talk? Why was calling someone a “little girl”—not a “little boy”—so derisive? Golub (2007) reported that such discourse realized “intense camaraderie.” However, this is something to be explained rather than asserted.

Was *World of Warcraft* a social environment in which “a woman today can do everything as long as she does it in relative subordination to a man” (Haavind, quoted in Corneliusen 2008)? Was *WoW* discourse the result of the suppression of certain kinds of masculine discourse in ordinary life in favor of the politically correct? Was such discourse the acting out of young males? Pearce (2008) reported that baby boomer age men in the game *Uru* were less inclined to speak in the ways common to *WoW*. However, I observed men in their thirties, forties, and fifties regularly engaging in masculinist talk in *WoW*, so I am not so sure.

Women sometimes used terms for females such as bitch, slut, whore, and hooker (an apparent acceptance, on the part of the less powerful, of the logics of the powerful; see Freire 2000). They flirted and engaged frequently, and with enjoyment, in explicit sexual banter. I do not want to represent female *WoW* players as shrinking violets because they were not. For some, the boys’ tree house was a space in which they were welcome to speak any way they wanted.

But female players generally avoided hardcore masculinist rhetoric. They did not belittle other players by calling them “little girl” (or “little boy” for that matter). They sometimes used “gay” to disparage (much less often than males), but I never heard a female call anyone “homo.” Female players avoided the language of what one player referred to as “the female denigrations,” by which she meant words such as cunt or slang terms for genitalia such as clit (see Thelwall 2008). Female players did not joke about rape.

It is unclear how female players felt about such language. Since they did not typically employ it themselves, at some level it was rejected. One evening a female player, Karlin—herself given to very colorful language—said in voice chat, with dismay, “Sahm just called us cunts.” Sahm had used the word in text chat. He made a joking apology. Having been called out by a popular female member of the guild, I did not hear him use the word again (although others did).

Sometimes it seemed that male players sustained the atmosphere of the tree house simply by invoking masculinist terms. As a male player, Barbarino, came online, the following comments were made by male players with no rancor:

Jene: barbarino is a slut.

Popzikal: he is gay and faggot

Barbarino did not respond, nor did anyone say anything. It was as though the ether of the chat channel must be regularly refreshed with the recitation of sexualized, homophobic words.

*WoW* was an arena in which males set the tone for the use of language prohibited in many everyday settings (notably school and work). However, the magic circle may also invite women to “forbidden areas of darkness.” In the private chat channel for healers opened during raids in Scarlet Raven, women sometimes discussed sexual methodologies in humorous detail. There were usually a few males present in the channel, but they said nothing. Having a gender majority and a silenced male population seemed to provide a space in which women took the lead in subversive talk because they could control the terms of the conversation. However, this was largely an invisible, private channel seen by only a few in the guild. In guildwide chat, as well as *WoW*’s other chat channels, males established the dominant rhetorical practice.<sup>7</sup> Golub (2007) suggested that raiding activity, and its associated rhetorical practice, was “deeply tied to [players’] sense of masculine self-competence and control.” He did not elaborate on this theme, but his comment points to the need for more research to understand how a sense of male self-competence and control plays out in a competitive game world in which females are also present.

## The Interactive Gendered Landscape

Despite all the sexualized talk, possibilities for actual flirtation and romance in *World of Warcraft* were complicated by the real life gender imbalance of players. The Internet is, of course, a great sexual shopping mall, so I was curious about the ways in which males and females negotiated a space in which sex was an entrenched part of the discourse, many young, unattached people were present, and anonymity provided cover for explorations difficult or impossible in real life.

I will argue that *WoW* players evolved two interactive planes in which gendered practice occurred. The dominant plane dampened heterosexuality, creating a relaxed space in which males did not have to worry about heterosexual activity. A secondary plane sustained heterosexual flirtation and romance. The dominant plane, produced and reproduced through the repetition of several practices which I will describe, yielded a stable, predictable backdrop tailored to the desires of many male players. The secondary plane, episodic and erratic, was more likely to entail rupture and tension while at the same time offering possibilities for pleasurable intimacies for both genders.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Dominant Plane*

The first plane was constructed in part through the practice of male players playing female characters. In a North American sample of *WoW* players, Yee (2005) found that 23 percent of real life males' characters were female characters. This choice—to play a female character—precluded a player from presenting as a male who might engage the interests of a female player through a (virtual) male body. Male players playing female characters erased the possibility of flirtations deploying the character as a resource, choosing instead a female fantasy character at which to gaze. Not only did the female character serve its own player's desires, at the same time, it made provision for the gaze of other males. Male players came together for "girl watching," an activity stereotypically characteristic of all-male groups and consistent with the boys' tree house.

Males getting together to watch girls would be likely to choose attractive female characters at which to gaze, and—no surprise—they did so (see Yee 2005; DiGiuseppe and Nardi 2007). The servers were full of alluring

## Gender

female Night Elves and Blood Elves, while the homely ladies of the Dwarf and Orc races were rarely seen. Distribution of male characters across the races was more even (Yee 2005). Gazing at female characters was, for males, a significant aspect of the visual experience of play.

When we interviewed males about why they chose female characters, they said two things. "Why not?" and "If I have to look at a someone's ass for three hours, it's going to be a girl's." (Recall that the character is typically seen in third-person perspective.) The latter comment was a *WoW* cliché and was mentioned in several interviews.

I supervised four undergraduate male players who conducted independent studies on various aspects of *World of Warcraft*. I asked them if I should believe men who said they just liked looking at female characters—was that really the reason they chose them? Was there something deeper? Was an identity workshop (Turkle 1995) taking place in *WoW*? Were males finding their inner female? The students said of males who said they liked looking at their female characters, "Believe them!"

My in-game experience supported this view. Both male and female players acknowledged that males liked looking at attractive female characters. One evening when I had just joined a new guild, I was talking in voice chat and a male player said, "A Night Elf who's really a girl!" A female player rejoined, "Guys just like Night Elves because of their boobs."

When one of my guildmates changed his male character to a female (something players could do for a fee), the guild teased him mercilessly about his "sex change operation."<sup>9</sup> In defense, he typed into the guild chat window, "i didn't wanna keep looking at a guy character." This logic was taken to be transparent and obvious, and no one questioned it.

Through the design of certain of the female characters, *WoW* provided a resource to reproduce a standard gender dynamic, the male gaze (see Mulvey 1975). However, visually, things were pretty tame. While the male gaze was sustained in *WoW*, in particular through the design of the Human, Night Elf, and Blood Elf racials, as well as some of the NPCs, and a few items of "kombat lingerie" (Fron et al. 2007b), for the most part, female characters were relatively modest. Other video games contain far more egregious body and costume designs (see Taylor 2003a; Hayes 2005; Fron et al. 2007b). And though males tended to like Blood Elves and Night Elves, *WoW* offered a range of female character types of varying attractiveness, again unlike many games (see Cornelussen 2008).

Further shaping of the gendered landscape ensued from the common rhetorical practice of males calling each other slut, hooker, whore, or bitch, terms typically associated with women. This discourse had the effect of deleting sexual difference among males and females—such difference being a precondition for heterosexuality—in the first plane, as anyone could be called anything by anyone.

Players usually assumed that other players were male. In pugs, players often addressed me as “man,” “dude” or “bro” or referred to me as “he,” for example, “Ask the priest if he has any mage food on him.” No one that I observed pretended to be a girl when he had a female character; there was no “gender bending” (see Yee 2005).<sup>10</sup>

The salience of possible heterosexual encounters further receded in the first plane through the way in which players used flirtatious emotes. Emotes were one-word commands that caused the character to animate and/or voice actions and which output a text message in the chat window. If, for example, Innnikka selected another player with the mouse and typed /sexy, the command generated the text “Innnikka thinks Zeke is a sexy devil.”

Just as with the terms hooker-whore-slut-bitch, the emotes were used within and across real life genders, blunting heterosexual impact. Common emotes for flirting included /hug, /kiss, /lick, /moan, /whistle, /love, /wink, /grin, /cuddle, /flirt. Players’ habit of invoking emotes between and within genders rendered them “safe,” reducing the risk of making a move that might be rejected; a player could select a player at whom to direct an emote without feeling as though he or she had made a declaration of interest.

For male players, retrenching to the boys’ tree house to watch girls and engage in the activities of the game created a space in which pressure to compete for females was reduced or simply deleted. By flattening the interactive sexual landscape, males established the choice for themselves of focusing on performance, and kicking back to enjoy rough talk, without the need for the sometimes vexing activities of heterosexuality. It took work on their part to make this happen: choosing female characters, using gendered words across genders, and “flirting” with their own gender. The regularity with which these actions were engaged, to the point where they sometimes appeared to be random (as with the comments about Barbarino), suggests that males had considerable interest in undertaking actions to ensure the sustenance of the dynamics of the tree house.

Another practice suggesting a male desire to retrench from heterosexu-

ality, within the confines of *WoW*, occurred during late-night runs. Players sometimes announced in chat that they might be forced to depart in order to attend to their wives’ sexual needs (“damn it, she’s horny” “my wife, um, needs me”). Although attentive to their wives’ needs (possibly to avoid serious aggro), these players were attempting to delay freely offered sexual activity in favor of playing *World of Warcraft*. Sometimes a player left for a short while, presumably to negotiate the timing of the necessary activities. One player returned and deadpanned, “no problem, she’s out cold.”

The dominant plane was shaped by and for males. How did females fit in? The first plane was not maintained to shield females from the risks of heterosexual interaction as it was for males; female players squeezed into its interstices. Hayes (2005) observed, “Women have different interpretations of and responses to overtly gendered practices within video games.” Some females teased males about their proclivities toward Elves. Some ignored the machinations of the tree house and just played the game. Others negotiated the rhetorical space. For example, occasionally male utterances elicited a heartfelt female “ewww” in the chat window, indicating that the grossness of a comment was too much. Such negotiations were relatively uncommon, but when they occurred the impact could be significant, such as Karlin’s reaction to Sahm’s name-calling—a clear statement of her personal limits.

It is also possible that the actions that comprised the first plane bespoke complex gender dynamics such as males’ confused feelings about other males, and fears of homosexuality. I do not have data with which to explore such possibilities, though they are worth pursuing and not inconsistent with my interpretations of the actions of the first plane, which probably operated at multiple levels. Following Bakhtin (1982), we should consider “any written discourse an unfinished social dialogue,” and it is my hope that this discussion will stimulate further research analyzing the complexities of gendered rhetorical practice in games such as *World of Warcraft*, a topic oddly missing from the literature.

### *The Secondary Plane*

The secondary plane of gendered activity, a counterpoint to the first, incorporated cross-gender intimacy. In any space with males and females, boy will meet girl. Entangled with the mutations and transfigurations of cross-gender characters, rhetorical practices, and exaggerated gender norms,

were the simple desires of ordinary people for interaction with the opposite sex. It is easy to overlook this pervasive, fundamental reality in academic discussions of “constructing gender” and the like. The flattening of the sexual landscape in the first plane did not eliminate possibilities for flirtation and romance; it merely offered the choice not to worry about them. Flirtatious and romantic activities were, however, definitely present in *World of Warcraft*. For those who engaged them, whether married or not, they offered an aspect of play considerably more difficult to maneuver in real life where such activities are more likely to be taken seriously, leading to the possibility of rejection, aggro on the part of significant others, grievous misconstruals, disciplinary measures at work, or complex love affairs. In *WoW*, people could play at flirting—no/few strings attached. As Vandenberg (1998) observed, play has a built-in escape hatch:

[In play] the real can be rendered not real, by the simple signal, “This is play.”

This is not to say that real romance did not blossom out of playing-at-flirting in *World of Warcraft* or that flirting did not sometimes have serious in-game consequences. Occasionally, in the midst of a thousand ephemeral little flirtations, more serious developments lay ahead.

Early in the interview cycle, I interviewed (separately) a young player and her mother, both players. The young woman, who was married, had met, in-game, a player with whom she had fallen in love. She came to the brink of divorce, planning a trip to meet her *WoW* lover in the foreign country in which he resided. The mother intervened, urging her daughter to stop playing *World of Warcraft* and mend her marriage. The daughter complied and gave up *WoW*. In the interview, she was wistful about the pleasures of the game, into which memories of romance were woven with remembrance of game elements she described having loved.

Other instances of flirtatious activity entailed perils that played out in relation to performative dimensions of *World of Warcraft*.

Sean participated in a raiding guild of undergraduates. Trouble erupted in his guild when a group of male “e-pimps” and their female “e-hos” who “talked dirty” to them, became a source of tension. During raids, the e-hos directed their talk to the e-pimps, ignoring the other males. The neglected males were livid at their exclusion from the lively sexual banter.

The situation was intolerable for them, and discord grew until guild officers threw the e-pimps and e-hos out of the guild. Tellingly, the sexy guildmates were removed not under the auspices of talking dirty, but by being cast as incompetent players who could not raid properly. The gender issues, though obvious to everyone and unmistakably inscribed in the sexualized terms of the conversation, were not brought to bear as reasons for what Sean called the “purge.” Instead, a performative argument was constructed and accepted, legitimizing the purge as a performative deficiency rather than a dispute among the males.

Serena, a young player I interviewed, was forced to call on personal forbearance to accommodate a female-unfriendly practice in her guild of players in their twenties. Women were not allowed to speak on voice chat during raids. It was considered too disconcerting for the males, whose attentional focus, and thus performative excellence, might be disrupted by the sound of feminine voices. Serena was real life friends with many in the guild and enjoyed raiding with them. She accepted the guild policy but felt it was unnecessary.

A top European raiding guild, Nihilum, was rumored to refuse membership to women. A female blogger/player reported (WorldofWarcraft.com 2007a):

According to GM [guild master] Kungen, there are a lot of reasons they don't recruit females, but the one he highlights is the need for recruits to have a “high abuse tolerance.” And a bit later in the thread, poster Awake adds that female applicants are avoided because of drama.

The construction of drama as a reason for excluding females was consistent with the experiences of Sean’s guild, and the rumor was widely believed. However, a member of Nihilum posted, on an official Blizzard forum, that the putative exclusion of women was a false rumor stemming from an “internal joke” within the guild (WorldofWarcraft.com 2007b). The guild member went on to say that although Nihilum in fact had no women, women were free to apply.

The idea of the ban was believed (I first heard mention of it in Terror Nova, where it was taken seriously) and generated considerable discussion on blogs and forums. Opinions varied, but some posters endorsed exclusionary practice. One wrote:

It's not a misogynistic ideal for Nihilum to be a guys-only guild; in fact, it's exactly like most sports: there's women's hockey and men's hockey.

In the secondary plane of gendered activity, the tensions of heterosexuality sometimes brought with them old cultural logics even when they distorted conditions under which men and women might share joint performative activity. Physical differences between male and female bodies are presumably the reason for women's and men's hockey. Such differences are not relevant to activity that involves no feats of strength, yet the same argument was made.

That excluding women was a "joke" in Nihilum indicates that the notion of such exclusion was taken to be, on some level, "funny." Would Nihilum have joked about excluding an ethnic or racial group? The guild could not muster a single female player, suggesting de facto exclusionary practice.

Despite the disruptions and tensions occurring in the secondary plane, there was also a good deal of friendly flirtation and real romance. For example, two players, Juli and Nino, whom I had known in Scarlet Raven when they were both single, coincidentally ended up in my new guild, during which time they married. (Although in keeping with the disruptive potentialities of the second plane, an Irish player whom Juli had declared, before her marriage, to have "the sexiest accent," continued to flirt egregiously with her. That she was married seemed to make the flirtation more interesting to him, and I cannot say she discouraged him.)

Much romantic activity undoubtedly occurred in whispers, and of course I have no record of others' whispers. Through my own experiences, it was apparent how casual interactions might move to requests for personal information and expressions of interest. In one somewhat farcical encounter, I inadvertently activated the attentions of a man who was engaged to a woman in the guild whose mother was one of my in-game friends. Let me explain the progression of events (which occurred in the post-Scarlet Raven guild).

Flirtation in *World of Warcraft* often begins with the deployment of emotionally safe, impersonal emotes.<sup>11</sup> Although I was known as the guild "goody-goody," and teased as "pure" and in danger of corruption by the sexualized and scatological talk that dominated late-night voice chat, I used the impersonal flirting emotes widely and frequently because I found them funny and everyone enjoyed them. There was one player with whom

I always seemed to trade a long string of emotes; we liked throwing in some of the less common commands such as /ruffle ("Zeke ruffles Innika's hair") and /charm ("Innika thinks Zeke is charming").

The guild ran both 10- and 25-man dungeons frequently. I noticed that Zeke engaged Innika in flirty emoting only in the less challenging 10-man runs. I attributed this to the need for greater concentration in 25-man. One evening, in a 10-man, we needed a character with higher damage abilities for a particular boss. Zeke, a tank, said he would switch to Malore, a mage with high damage. (During a raid, it was possible for a player to leave the raid and the raid to bring in another player.) I whispered to him that I didn't know Malore was his character. He whispered, "she's not, I have access to a lot of accounts." I had played with Malore a few months previously, but she had not logged in recently.

Some time later, Zeke's whispers grew more personal. I had not seen that there might be anything other than emoting going on, and told him I was married. Zeke then revealed that he was engaged to Malore (whom he had met in *World of Warcraft*) but that the relationship was not going well. The emoting was restricted to the 10-man runs because Mianna, Malore's mother, attended the 25-man runs. Though things were difficult with Malore, Zeke still felt restraint in the presence of a potential mother-in-law. He had access to Malore's account because she was his fiancée, and had been vague in answering my question regarding the switch to avoid embarrassment.

Once things were out in the open, we laughed about the comedy of the situation and continued friends. Zeke was not exactly my age, but was older—divorced with a 12-year-old child. On my part, I liked him because he was a good player and always helpful to guildmates (and he was better at the emote game than anyone else). For his part, he said that his feelings were raw from his troubles, and any kind of female approval was a small comfort.

The secondary plane of gendered activity, then, engaged intimacies sometimes no different than those of any online space, affording communicative potentialities from which flirtatious or romantic activities might spring (see, e.g., boyd and Ellison 2007; Bardzell and Bardzell 2008; Toma et al. 2008). At other times, the particularities of the performative contours of *World of Warcraft* shaped expressions of intimacy and the complexities they entailed in the context of game performance. At still other times, con-

ventional cross-gender confusions played out in misreadings schematized by the particularities of social structures (such as guilds and raids) and practices (e.g., sharing accounts) peculiar to *World of Warcraft*.

In sum, what I have called the dominant and secondary planes of gendered interaction in *World of Warcraft* constructed two distinctive orientations. In the first plane, heterosexuality was devitalized in favor of the comforts of the tree house. In the second plane, heterosexuality was engaged, sometimes in relations of tension and discord, and other times in mutually pleasurable interactions between male and female players.

### Gender Participation and Game Design

Chapter 4 inquired into the power of software artifacts to direct human activity. This chapter has discussed the effects of the design of female characters on gendered practice in *World of Warcraft*. Most analysis of low rates of female participation in competitive video games focuses on the design of the games themselves. Many studies note that competitive games often include gendered elements unappealing to women (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Taylor 2003a; Graner Ray 2005; Hayes 2005; Mortensen and Corneliusen 2005; Fron et al. 2007b; Kafai et al. 2008). These analyses highlight issues such as the kombat lingerie (Fron et al. 2007a) female characters may wear, and hypersexualized female body types (Taylor 2003a; Hayes 2005; Fron et al. 2007b). The harsh masculinity of environments depicted in game spaces is seen as off-putting to women (Fullerton et al. 2007). The studies point out that game designers are nearly all male (Graner Ray 2005; Fron et al. 2007b; Consalvo 2008) and that advertising at trade shows is often designed around the girl-watching theme (Fron et al. 2003a). Some games contain elements particularly disturbing to women, e.g., in *EverQuest* there are moments at which a player must run around acquiring gear to cover nakedness (Klastrup 2004, cited in Mortensen and Corneliusen 2005). Other design elements reinforce a surly masculinity—such as *Neverwinter Nights*' brothels (Mortensen and Corneliusen 2005).

What about *World of Warcraft*? Did its design discourage female players? About 20 percent of the North American *WoW* population was female (Yee 2005)—a higher proportion than in many competitive video games such as first-person shooters (Kennedy 2005). But still, nowhere near 50 percent.

This middling number—20 percent—says that something was happening in *World of Warcraft* that fostered a higher than usual number of females. But it also says that something else was happening that kept the figure well under that expected in a random distribution. I believe that *World of Warcraft*'s design contained elements of strong appeal to women (and, in interesting ways, men), but that the gender conventions of the boys' tree house forestalled some female players. In addition, the sheer amount of time it took to play *World of Warcraft* may have affected female participation.

I will never forget how enthralled I was when I first approached Darnassus, capital city of the Night Elves. Outside its walls were beautiful meadows colored emerald green and a particularly striking purple-violet. I hadn't expected to find my favorite colors in *World of Warcraft*, especially in such exquisitely complementary shades. I felt at home. I felt dazzled, I felt that the game was designed for me. While appreciating that men may also like these colors, I consider them feminine—they appear in female clothing, jewelry, and upholstery and curtain fabrics; they are not typically associated with the material world of males.

Rather than being expressive of stereotypical masculinist sensibilities, *WoW* was more nuanced, introducing elements appealing to women (and many men) in both game activities and the presentation of the game space. Fullerton et al.'s (2007) description of masculinist games establishes a baseline with which we can compare *World of Warcraft*. They wrote of masculinist games:

Thematically, these games revolve around narratives of warfare, anti-terrorism, invading aliens, zombies, science fiction, combat with robots. Aesthetically, their settings tend to be highly rectilinear, typically manmade spaces, often the bruised and embattled remains of an urban environment, warehouse, office building, space ship, space colony, or high tech laboratory gone horribly wrong. They are typically constructed of hard materials: cinder block, metal grid work, HVAC infrastructure, with heavily mechanical components, reinforced by the sound effects of footsteps echoing on metal or concrete floors. They are often bleak, militaristic, post apocalyptic or futuristic. Spaces are dimly lit and color palettes are dark and monochromatic.

Few women and girls are attracted to game spaces depicting disorder, terror, and violence. Nothing about *World of Warcraft* matched this description

(with the exception of some dark lighting, and that was polychromatic).<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, varying palettes of tertiary colors, the sounds of water or frogs croaking, beautiful night skies, the use of curves and soft shapes, and snug inns, shops, and storefronts, constructed a visual experience congenial to most female players. Although *WoW*'s audio could be cacophonous during battle, it was also the case that in Karazhan harpsichord music was heard. Medieval tunes played in the cozy inns of the capital cities (where one could seat one's character before a roaring fire). Symphonic music in many parts of the game geography was reminiscent of the scoring of feature films, creating a cultured atmosphere—in contrast to the desolation of the games Fullerton et al. describe.

A favorite *WoW* activity was the acquisition of small cuddly pets such as piglets or baby elephants. Such pets would be unthinkable in masculinist games. Seasonal changes in *WoW* graphics included decidedly feminine elements: season-appropriate wreaths, candles, and garlands of flowers festooned the capital cities. Artistically, *WoW* was a long way from menacing footsteps echoing on a concrete floor.

A feminine element of domesticity suffused *WoW*; it was especially evident in the capital cities, which provided a *home*. After bruising battles, a player returned to the safety of, say, Ironforge or Orgrimmar to replenish supplies, auction off loot, bump into friends, watch duels, admire the rare mounts of lucky players. These spaces were the staging ground for seasonal decorations and activities such as the Lunar Festival (around the time of Chinese New Year), Halloween, Christmas, and the Midsummer Fire Festival. The capital cities were clean, orderly, and in perfect repair. They exuded stability and good governance. The masculinist spaces described by Fullerton et al. (2007) were, by contrast, always on the verge of chaos and destruction—hardly places in which to find the colorful decorations beautifying capital cities during holiday events in *World of Warcraft*.

*WoW* was populated by powerful male and female NPCs. Some of the biggest bosses were female. Corneliusen (2008) observed, "The relatively large number of female NPCs indicates a willingness by Blizzard to break with traditional ways of gendering computer game universes." Male and female characters deployed the same powers, delimited by class not gender. There were neither princesses to be rescued nor dashing male heroes saving the day. Despite *WoW*'s medieval accents, standard gendered fairy tale tropes were turned on their head. Princess Theradras, for example, was a

wonderfully hideous, misshapen gal who put up a tough fight and whose desirable loot made her fun to kill—the opposite of a damsel in distress safe inside a tower awaiting her prince. The male Blood Elves, about as close as *WoW* got to handsome princes, were not the manly studs of fairy tales but amusingly effeminate boy-guys, animated by feminine gestures.<sup>13</sup>

In a popular Web comedy series, *The Guild*, produced by actress, writer, and gamer Felicia Day, the following dialogue (season 2, episode 10) dramatized the opening for female players created by *WoW*'s feminine elements. (The game in the series is a *WoW* knockoff, and the characters play together in a guild called The Knights of Good.)

Codex, the main character, is having a party at her apartment. She is infatuated with a neighbor, Wade. Wade shows up with a tall, self-confident girl, Riley, who makes Codex feel even more insecure than usual. (Codex and her friends refer to Riley as Stupid Tall Hot Girl.)

Riley: Wade said you were a gamer. That's bitchen! It's so hot to meet another girl who games. It's tight. What games do you play?

Codex: Uh, you know, role playing games mostly.

Riley: Oh (sneers). I'm an FPS girl. Halo, boom, headshots! I'm ranked and stuff.

Codex: Well, I kill stuff too, it's just I wear prettier outfits.

Codex references *WoW*'s feminine aspects through her invocation of "prettier outfits." She's been owned in the interaction by the competitive girl ranked in a masculine game but manages to point out that she "kills stuff too." Codex's comment exemplifies the truly disparate elements that come together in *World of Warcraft*: killing stuff and pretty outfits (as well as the other feminine elements they stand in for). The outfits Codex referred to were not male-fantasy kombat lingerie; *WoW* gear included, among many lovely designs, beautifully flowing robes for mages and priests and elegant pants and tunics for rogues and druids.

Game activities, especially crafting and gathering, were cross-gendered. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) reported that 30 to 40 percent of players' time was spent in formal groups, a reasonable proxy for competitive play. When



A *Halo* character



A *World of Warcraft*  
Blood Elf

not in the formal grouping of a party, raid, arena, or battleground, and thus engaged in competition, players were busy in varied activities, including buying and selling at the Auction House, crafting gear, collecting materials, brewing potions, cooking, making bandages, fishing, and farming.

In ordinary life, many of these activities are associated primarily with one gender, such as cooking (female) or blacksmithing (male). In *WoW*, both genders engaged in them. It was notable to see grown men (or rather, their characters) sitting before virtual fires frying up fish or baking chocolate cake. Or to come upon the character of a female player smelting metal or heaving a mining pick. Male players tailored elaborate colorful robes for themselves while female players stood before forges pounding out swords. Cooking, sewing, and collecting herbs are traditionally feminine activities while engineering, blacksmithing, and mining are typically masculine. *WoW* offered players the chance to *play at* these gendered activities, allowing them to move back and forth across boundaries of male and female. Players chose activities because they made sense for the development of their characters, contributing to their performative abilities. This motivation obscured and downplayed, but did not remove, gender attributions (see also Cornelussen 2008).<sup>14</sup>

Just as male players got down with cooking and making jewelry, with picking flowers and working at handicrafts, so female players enjoyed the chance to be tough, to talk about, and engage in, killing and pwning. Taylor (2003b) reported of her *EverQuest* study participants:

I have been struck by how often women remark on enjoying jumping into the fray of fights, taking on difficult monsters, and, as one user put it, “kicking ass.”

I questioned a female rogue in Scarlet Raven, an older woman who called herself the “Guild Grandma”:

To Jacquii: how come you chose rogue?

Jacquii whispers: don’t like being so squishy and I lov being in the middle of the fight. and I can take shit down easy on rogue!

*WoW* subverted gender norms by offering activities with traditional gen-

der connotations that were presented as simply things to do to improve your character, or merely to play, like Jacquii taking shit down. Players ran back and forth across invisible gender boundaries unselfconsciously engaging transgressive practice—not *qua* transgression, but in conformance with the logic of the game—to enhance performance. Corneliusen (2008) remarked, “Gender is present in *World of Warcraft* in many ways, but it is not necessarily insistent or obvious.”

By contrast, masculinist shooter games such as *Quake* overtly reinforce hyperreal gender norms (Fullerton et al. 2007). Any female player is by definition a visible rebel. Kennedy (2005) studied female *Quake* players. One of her study participants said:

Next time we played together over a LAN [local area network] connection I held up my end and I could see that the blokes were really surprised and even a bit fed up that I was “fragging” them so successfully . . . I LOVED IT! (Amanda/Xena)

Kennedy observed:

These female players—who take pleasure in the mastery of the game which is seen as requiring skills which are clearly demarcated as masculine—are aware of the transgressive nature of their pleasure.

Amanda’s character Xena developed “masculine” skills that she deliberately showed off in the public arena of LAN play. The skills were unambiguously perceived as masculine. In *WoW*, collecting herbs, cooking, and so on were not gender marked. Nor was killing things.

*WoW* players had no need to form opinions about gendered game activities or even think about them; they simply assumed the activities as being necessary to play. Within the game, the activities were an aspect of the gender-neutral performative activity of improving a character. The covertness of the gender inflections released players from obvious reflections on gender while allowing them to perform, in play, cross-gender activities. *WoW* was, then, quietly subversive in its gender dynamics, enabling the unremarked enactment of cross-gender activities as an aspect of character development.

Females nearly always chose female characters in *World of Warcraft* (Yee

2005; Kavetsky 2008). The reasons were unclear. Female players said they wanted a character who represented “who I am.” They were vague in their answers while men gave simple, crisp responses to questions about character choice. Graner Ray (2004) received the same vague answers from female players she interviewed, e.g., “Playing a male character just doesn’t feel right” (see also Taylor 2003a).

It seems, then, that *WoW* enabled males to get a kick out of cooking or picking flowers and, at the same time, to indulge in masculinist language far beyond that permissible in many everyday settings. Females reinscribed conventional female preoccupations in choosing female characters, but they simultaneously participated in a social order in which they could talk about killing and pwning and engage in over-the-top flirtation and sexualized talk.

These juxtapositions seem like contradictions. But play permits us to abandon acquiescence to a consistency demanded in everyday life. In play we move to a space in which we can be more than one thing, however opposed those things might be in the logics of ordinary existence. When inhabiting the magic circle, we thrust out in both directions, engaging, in exaggerated form, quotidian conventions, while at the same time crossing over to “forbidden areas of darkness.”

The complexly gendered game space of *World of Warcraft* offered something out of the ordinary for both males and females. Given the huge popularity (and presumed profitability) of *World of Warcraft*, we can endorse the rightness of Fron et al.’s (2003a) argument:

Far from being a commercial death knell to the video game industry, [designing beyond the standard male stereotypes] can actually serve to expand the game market to be more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming across a broader demographic range.

*World of Warcraft*—with its candles and flowers, its domestic coziness, provisions for safe flirtation, and topsy-turvy accountings of traditionally gendered folk tales—seemed to move toward a play space of the kind envisioned by Fullerton et al. (2007), a space “where everyone can feel included, inspired, enlivened, and entertained.” Hayes (2005) observed that “games that combine elements associated with more stereotypically masculine and feminine pleasures and strengths may ultimately be the most stimulating

and . . . valuable games." It seems that *WoW* has realized such a space, combining masculine and feminine elements in its design, appealing to women more than most competitive video games.

Why, then, aren't even more women playing *World of Warcraft*? While female gamers are visible and their presence should not be ignored (see Bryce and Rutter 2005; Taylor 2006), in *WoW*, they are still a minority.

I do not have a ready answer to this question and can only say that it requires more research. The answer is likely to be found in a tangle of gendered practices and ideations, including the fact that women feel they do not have enough time to devote to a game like *WoW*. Systematic research is essential for looking into this question, but in describing my research in casual conversations women often responded that they did not have time for such a game. Female disinterest in competitive gaming is also likely part of the story—an aspect of deep, little-understood cultural predicaments. The need to accommodate males' sexualized, homophobic rhetoric was surely a constraint for many females. In battlegrounds when (probably young male) players were typing vagina, pussy, and faggot into the chat window just because they could, I was reminded of Mrs. Pain's daughter.

We must also ask why women themselves have not created games that meet the requirements delineated by Fullerton et al. and Hayes (see also Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2007; and Flanagan et al. 2008). It is not up to men to do this for us. "Girl games," such as *Purple Moon*, essentialized stereotypical female elements. This strategy proved a failure, and "Today, there is no pink aisle at most local games stores," as Jenkins and Cassell (2008) pointed out.

Perhaps as women come to see themselves more boldly, as they acknowledge a need for fun and permit themselves the recreational time men take as a given, they will come to competitive gaming as Mrs. Pain did:

- [14:03] Mrs. Pain: alot of the players I play with are guys
- [14:03] Mrs. Pain: and are alot younger then me
- [14:03] Mrs. Pain: but I have formed a friendship with them
- [14:03] Dan: Do you think age matters in games?
- [14:03] Mrs. Pain: NO
- [14:04] Mrs. Pain: I think ppl who don't know me have a certain stereo type of me
- [14:04] Mrs. Pain: they think A. I am not a woman

- [14:04] Mrs. Pain: just pretending to be one
- [14:04] Mrs. Pain: or B
- [14:05] Mrs. Pain: Iam big, fat and ugly
- [14:05] Mrs. Pain: it is impossible to think that a woman and mother could enjoy herself?
- [14:05] Mrs. Pain: what once you hit a certain age the fun stops?
- [14:06] Mrs. Pain: and you cant juggle your life to fit in games
- [14:06] Mrs. Pain: once they get to know me
- [14:06] Mrs. Pain: they love me
- [14:06] Mrs. Pain: well most
- [14:06] Mrs. Pain: lol

## Culture: WoW in China . . . and North America

In an Internet cafe in Shanghai, a nurse, age 22, has just completed a boss kill. Other characters are nearby, some dancing, some running around. The nurse, who plays a warlock, auctions off the boss's loot to the raid members, counting down 4 3 2 1, before the final price is set and typed into the chat window. Those who won an auction pay her, and take receipt of their new armor, weapon, recipe, or pattern. Everyone in the raid receives a cut of the gold collected in the auction.

In North America, if one says "China" and "*World of Warcraft*" in the same sentence, the immediate free association is typically "Chinese gold farmer." I am puzzled by the fascination with Chinese gold farming—in our world of global capitalism, anyone can make money selling anything, so why not in a virtual game? The meme belies an inchoate sense of disturbance; far away, Chinese people have found a way to intrude into the North American economy by slipping into a virtual world (see Nakamura 2009).

The single biggest national group of *WoW* players was Chinese (Blizzard Press Release 2008). Chinese players were an overwhelmingly important market for Blizzard and a critical part of the global gaming community. Chinese people played *World of Warcraft* for the same reasons as North Americans or Europeans or Koreans, and they were employed elsewhere to make a living. There were gold farmers in China, but they were a tiny minority of players, as were their North American and European counterparts.

In the vignette, the player conducted what the Chinese called "gold raids." She was not raiding for real money but was directing a practice I did

not observe in North America—running raids with auctions to raise game gold for individuals or guilds who needed it to purchase better equipment. Chinese players participating in gold raids were after high-end "purple" loot (loot was color coded) to empower their characters for raiding. One player explained:

When I got to level 60, my equipment was not good. I participated in some gold raids for better equipment. At that time I was covered in greens [low-end gear] so it was certain the raid team in the guild would not accept me. I joined gold raiding activities and gradually gained the purple gear.

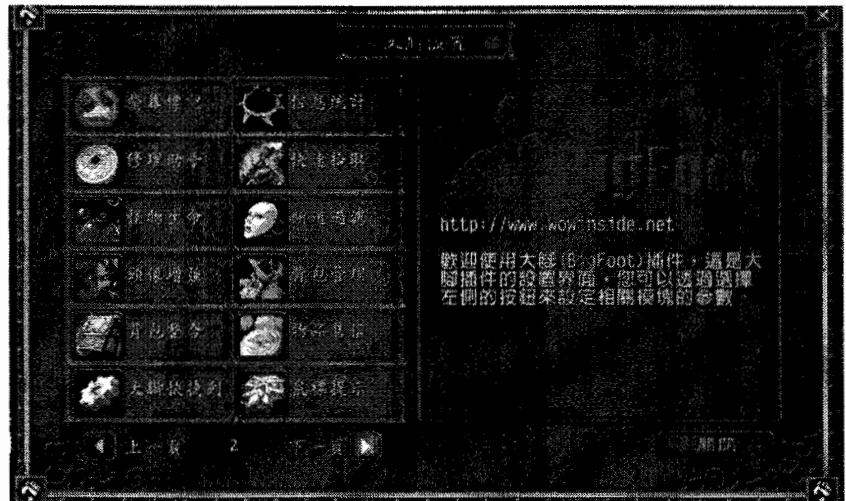
Gold raids allowed players with sufficient gold to acquire items they wanted without having to be lucky or raid a lot. Normally, a player would have to win the roll of the dice in a raid or accumulate points for raid participation using "DKP" (Dragon Kill Points) (see Thott n.d.). The Chinese used DKP, but came up with gold raids as an alternative, adding another solution to the ever-present problem of improving performance through better gear. With gold raids, a player merely needed to have gold, and the game offered many ways to earn gold without the rigors of regular raiding.

I went to China to try to understand something of the roughly half of all *World of Warcraft* players. With my research assistants, I talked to players in Internet cafes, dormitories, and apartments. We interviewed 40 people, 34 male and 6 female. Study participants included students, a factory worker, a middle school teacher, a bank employee, a marketing supervisor, a vice president of design for a Chinese game company, and a venture capital broker. The players we spoke to ranged in age from 18 to 37, although most were in their twenties.

Study participants were acquired through the social networks of the Chinese research assistants, and by requesting interviews in Internet cafes. When possible, we asked the cafe owner or manager if it was okay for us to interview. We were never refused and were always treated cordially. We approached players in the cafes and asked if they would have time for an interview. Most said yes. We sometimes sat beside study participants and watched them play, as we did with the nurse in the gold raid. In some cases we took study participants to dinner or to a nearby restaurant for soft drinks or a snack. Interviews were audiotaped. They were transcribed and translated by the native speakers on the team.



Playing games in an Internet cafe, Beijing, Summer 2007



Bigfoot, one of two of the major mod compilation sites in China

My biggest finding in China was that, overall, Chinese players were remarkably like the North American players I studied. They liked the sociability of *WoW*, the competitive challenge, the graphics, the color. They extended the game through the use of mods. They played with friends and family.

The major difference in play between China and North America was the setting in which the game was often played—the *wang ba* or Internet cafe. In *wang ba*, players were surrounded by other players; it was a “mixed reality” of virtual and physical social interaction (Lindtner et al. 2008). *Wang ba* are the second most frequent site of computer usage in China after the workplace (CNNIC 2007), providing places to access digital technologies for millions of people. Internet cafes are popular not only in China but in Korea (Stewart and Choi 2003; Chee 2006; Rea 2009), Australia (Beavis et al. 2005), the United Kingdom (Wakeford 2003), Canada (Powell n.d.), and elsewhere.

In China, and wherever they are found, Internet cafes go a long way toward solving problems of the so-called digital divide; they offer quality computer hardware in accessible public spaces. Chinese players reported choosing *wang ba* either because they did not own personal computers or because they had low Internet bandwidth and/or low-end computer equip-



Close quarters in a dorm room in Beijing, Summer 2007

ment. *Wang ba* provided high-end equipment and bandwidth that made game play more enjoyable.<sup>1</sup>

Qiu and Liuning (2005) observed that Chinese players frequented Internet cafes not only because of the computer equipment but to meet friends and peers. We observed this social practice and also found that tight living spaces and family dynamics affected decisions about where to play. The rooms in student dormitories we visited were shared by four to eight people and could accommodate no more than a small desk and bed for each student, an area that was also used as a work space. Many young professionals in China live at home with their parents until they are married.

Small living spaces, as well as parental disapproval of game play, drew players to Internet cafes. A worker at a trading company in Shanghai explained why he played in an Internet cafe:

First, my house is tiny and it affects my parents. Second, the computer hardware at home is not as good.

These findings are consistent with those of Thomas and Lang (2007) who reported that *wang ba* "have emerged as the place for urban Chinese youth to be youth, [and], as one of the few places young urban Chinese can escape the pressures of schooling, work, and their parents."

The social atmosphere of the *wang ba* was crucial to players' experience. A young business professional with good equipment at home explained that he nonetheless went to *wang ba* because:

Home has no atmosphere.

Another player said:

I enjoy playing at the café because there are more people, it's more exciting. Most of the guild activities are at night, so the people all show up late in the Internet café. I enjoy the atmosphere of people playing around me.

A bank employee said:

Sometimes, when I come to play at the Internet cafe, I meet people here. So these people, I would get their QQ [Chinese instant messaging system] ID to stay in touch. People who sit next to you in the cafe or I know from real life, we are more inclined to keep in touch.

Guild members sometimes met face-to-face in *wang ba* to play together. One player told us that his whole guild had developed, and played together, in a cafe. Often guild members living in the same city knew each others' phone numbers and coordinated playtimes on the phone. Our first interview in China was with a group of five young men who had assembled in an Internet cafe to play *WoW* after work and were then planning to go to dinner together.

The interplay of the physical and the virtual was apparent when players sat next to each other engaging in both face-to-face and digital interaction. Chinese players moved between visual and social immersion online, and the social and physical context of the *wang ba*. Given the global prevalence of Internet cafes, it seems we are redefining, and reshaping, "virtual" experience into a hybrid, mixed reality of the virtual and the physical (see Crabtree and Rodden 2007; Lindtner et al. 2008).

The same dynamic was at play in North America and Europe in more limited settings. In student dormitories where LAN parties are held, and social networking software such as Facebook is utilized to organize dorm social life (Ellison et al. 2007; Lampe 2007), a merge of the physical and digital takes place. One of my first interviews for the *WoW* research took me to San Diego to visit three students who played together in their apartment. It was a shocking mess, with old pizza boxes strewn around, dirty clothes dumped in the most unlikely places, and serious grunge everywhere. Each student sat in his own room at his own computer, but they called out to one another and occasionally jumped up to go look at one another's screens.

In everyday social contexts, family members and friends may play together in the same physical space, talking and laughing while they play (Peterson 2007). So while the *wang ba* is a kind of public space not widely found in North America, some of its sociability is replicated in other settings.

Shared interest in a game provides a means by which people collaborate and socialize. In *wang ba*, players sat next to each other to talk and play:

If there is an empty seat next to a *WoW* player I go over there to sit next to him—even though it is in a really crowded area. We look at each other's equipment and have a conversation about it. Sometimes we exchange seats with other people so that we [*WoW* players] can sit closer to each other. If I am playing by myself I am bored and leave the Internet café. The people here are nice, we play together, they all live around here. We know each other from playing the game.

Notions of “cyberspace” or “metaverse” situate activity solely within the virtual context, missing the more complex experience in which a merge of virtual and real occurs. In *wang ba*, players drew on face-to-face interaction in the physical space of the cafe, as well as the content of the virtual world of the game to shape experience.

Although the *wang ba* had a positive social energy, we observed a somewhat higher level of wariness on the part of Chinese players than was common in North America. Every economic transaction in and around the game contained within it the potential for abuse, a potential of which Chinese players were constantly aware. In particular, the system of payment

for the game presented an opportunity for cheating that probably contributed to Chinese players' more common experience of being defrauded.

In North America, most players paid for *WoW* by credit card. In China, “point cards,” which provided a certain number of hours of play, were used. Often players exchanged game gold for point cards. Sometimes the transaction went bad (in either direction). Having been cheated in a point card transaction was a common experience and came up in the interviews repeatedly. (Initially we did not know enough to ask about it; players themselves raised the topic in the open-ended interviews.)

Many players had had their characters stolen through keylogging or by other means. While North Americans also lost characters, it seemed more of a risk in China. A survey conducted by the China *WoW* Developers' Group reported that half of nearly 400 respondents had had their accounts stolen at least once (Kow and Nardi 2009). One Chinese modder facetiously remarked, “If you have not had your account stolen, you are not a real *WoW* player.”

Gold raids sometimes became “black gold” raids in which a guild would recruit players from outside the guild to participate in the raid and then keep all the gold for itself. Promising to distribute the gold at the end of the raid, the raid leaders would instead immediately logoff, leaving the nonguild players empty-handed. Or an individual player would organize a pug and keep all the gold.

Chinese players fought these practices by using the General chat channel to broadcast the names of guilds and individuals who conducted black gold raids. They would also broadcast the names of players who had cheated them individually when selling point cards. After an incident in which he did not receive a point card he had paid for, one player explained:

I reported in the General chat that the person is a liar and is ripping people off. Then he [the perpetrator] logged off. I added him to my Friends List so that I can see every time he comes online and I can tell other people he is not trustworthy.

This player went on to say that if you have had a character stolen you should “go online and warn other people.” He suggested creating a low-level character for this purpose.

I never saw the General chat channel on North American servers used

to report cheaters. But guild websites posted stories about players to avoid. For example, a player on the Scarlet Raven website alerted the guild about someone whose paladin character often organized pugs and rolled on gear he did not need. A second player responded to the post, saying that he had also had a bad experience with the miscreant:

I will certainly agree/confirm all of this. I ran heroic SH [a dungeon] with him and several other instances in the past. He is an amazing pally tank, but a gigantic dick.

He need rolled a piece of gear I wanted for my shaman and won, then sharded it and heathed.

The paladin ninja-ed the shaman gear which he could not use except to transform to a shard (a component in enchantments). The gear the shaman wanted was a rare drop, not something he could hope to obtain without probably running the instance again many times. A shard, on the other hand, could be made from any piece of gear. After inappropriately taking the gear, the paladin disappeared, just as his Chinese counterparts had.

Chinese players went public in denouncing swindlers, while North Americans tended to warn guild members, suggesting the somewhat higher sense of alertness developed on the part of Chinese players.

Some players felt there was considerable cheating because of China's rapid transition to a new economy. One said:

[There is more cheating in China] right now with the quality of life, definitely more than in Europe or America. This is going on in China because Chinese people find money very important because it's just becoming industrialized. It's a little more chaotic.

While North American players bought and sold *WoW* accounts on the Internet, and there were plenty of gold-selling and power-leveling services, there appeared to be more real money/game transactions in China or at least more kinds of such transactions. For example, one guild paid for its voice chat server with gold raised by the guild, which was then sold for RMB (Chinese currency). To economize, many players earned all their play by buying point cards with game gold. Point cards generally sold

for 300 to 550 gold, although prices fluctuated and varied by server. One player said:

I got a lot of gold with my hunter character. I used it to buy point cards. For example, 400 gold for a point card. I look at it as a free game, because I exchange game gold for point cards.

Another said:

If you are clever, you can earn a point card one day in-game.

Just as *World of Warcraft* drew together and mingled real and in-game economies, it also became entangled in Chinese political realities:

Horde have a race Undead. In the past it had only bones with no flesh. Now all Undead grow flesh on their bodies which is not good-looking.

Just before we arrived in China, the Chinese government declared that the Undead race, presented as skeletal creatures, would have to be redrawn with "flesh on their bodies," as the player noted. In addition to fleshing out the images of Undead, images of skeletons that remained after player death were replaced with large, apparently freshly dug graves heaped with brown dirt. The government action was part of an effort to "purify the Internet of anything that might affect national cultural information security or undermine the attempt to promote a harmonious society" (Dicki 2007; see also Golub and Lingley 2008).

Skeletons have no particular traditional meaning in Chinese culture, and pictures of them did not violate cultural sensibilities (although it would be disrespectful to fail to attend to the remains of a parent or close relative). The prominent graves were far more realistic and noticeable. A player who was an employee at a consulting firm said:

I am not quite clear about the reason [for the action]. Perhaps it is China's political situation. In the past when you died [in the game] there were bones and skeletons, but now graves are used instead. What we were told is that the skeletons frustrate and scare people. But I feel graves are actually scarier.

The government's action appeared to be a reminder that its censors were monitoring the game and could alter game design to conform to a value pervasively promoted by the Chinese government: "harmony." One player explained:

It's a grave, which didn't exist before. Before . . . there used to be a skeleton. It . . . is part of the government project to introduce harmony.

Another player was more critical:

We dislike the harmony such as the disappearance of skeletons . . . It is feudal and introduced as part of the whole cultural environment in China.

It is perhaps alarming that a government would intrude into a video game to change something as innocuous to Western eyes as a skeleton. But video games seem to attract the attention of moral arbiters. Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007) analyzed the video game monitoring activities of fundamentalist Christian organizations in the United States. Such groups cannot force Blizzard to redraw game graphics, but their critical gaze and directives to their adherents share some similarities with the Chinese government's attempts to shape game content to reflect cultural ideations such as harmony.

Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007) reported that a website called Christian Answers evaluated video games according to a quantitative scheme. Games were rated on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best) in the following way:

Christian Rating ("Is the game anti-Christian and immoral in any way?"), Violence ("Is it violent? Does it encourage violent behavior?"), Adult Content ("Sexual encounters, nudity, or suggestive or sexually immoral material?"), and Game Play ("Is the game fun to play? High quality?")

Apart from the dubiousness of scoring games with such quantitative scales (how many body parts need appear to get the dreaded score of 1 for Adult Content?), Bainbridge and Bainbridge observed that the ratings appeared in reviews whose texts criticized games for positively valuing non-Christian traditions and which attempted to create fear around themes such as

"witchcraft" and "sorcery." They reported the following reviews, which give a sense of the logics and rhetoric Christian critics employed to discourage adherents from playing video games.

For example, witchcraft raised red flags for Christian reviewers:

Perhaps reminded of Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," reviewers are offended by thirty-eight games involving magic and witchcraft. Even the popular Pokémon games for young children, in which the player trains cute little animals, come in for criticism: "To gain the competitive edge, a trainer must use magic potions to heal and strengthen his Pokémon, and wear magic badges to control the stronger Pokémon. In addition, the really powerful Pokémon have psychic powers and can throw curses. This bears disturbing similarities to witchcraft."

Reincarnation was also feared. One reviewer wrote sadly that:

In *Final Fantasy VII*, instead of actually dying, characters in this world diffuse into the planet—into the "Lifestream," where their consciousness lives on.

The suspicion with which games were viewed by those who found their appeal threatening was expressed in different institutions in China and North America, but the disapproving gaze transcended national boundaries. The activity of watching and judging was sustained in China by government officials and in North America by functionaries of conservative religious traditions. Around 40 percent of Americans identify as born-again Christians (Barna Group 2008); Christian monitoring of games is a culturally significant activity.

Players themselves may gaze with disapproval at the practices of other players. In China, many male players avoided playing female characters. They feared being called "ladyboy"—a term that connotes transvestite or transsexual. One player said:

I hate such ladyboy characters.

Another said he always played males. We asked why.

I don't know. I just dislike turning into a ladyboy. Although the game is a virtual one, a boy is supposed to be a boy and a girl is supposed to be a girl ... Before this game, I played a Chinese game in which boys and girls could get married. If the two are both boys, I would feel disgusted.

Players repeated this theme:

Dai: My characters are all male. If I picked a female character, they would call me a ladyboy.

Guang: If you are a boy but you play a female character, others will call you ladyboy. I don't want to be called that.

Jian: It's strange to play a female. I do not like the way people look at you if you play a female character. I don't like people mistaking me for a female.

Quan: I don't like the way it feels to play a female character. It doesn't feel comfortable. I don't like the way other players look at me and talk to me then.

One male player began with a female character because he liked the way it looked. But he soon gave up:

When I was first developing my character, the female one, it was always really troublesome to explain that I am a guy in real life. The male is more natural.

A female player who played a female character said:

Sometimes people mistake me for a man and they call me ladyboy. But I don't care.

Despite the disapproval of ladyboys, some Chinese males did choose and enjoy female characters because the female characters were "prettier."

One male player said:

Sometimes I choose a female character, if it looks pretty.

He favored Night Elves.

Another player agreed:

The female Elf is the most beautiful.

Another said:

I never played a female character before. I wanted to see it. The movement is prettier.

We asked male players who played females if they sought a new kind of experience or identity. They answered as American males had.

BN: Is playing a female also a kind of experience change?

Chen: No, it is not. I am a male myself and it is not interesting if there is a male in front of me and I have to face him every day. If your character is a female, it will be more pleasing to both the eye and the mind.

Another player said that playing a female was not a problem for him because it was obvious in chat that he was male:

BN: Do people approach you differently because you are a female character?

Bao: No. They usually can figure it out by the way you chat.

Another said:

If I play a female character, I would say that I am a guy. If they ask me, I tell them.

As in North America, there appeared to be no effort to engage in gender-bending in the sense of males presenting as females. Playing a female character was simply a positive visual experience for males willing to risk being called ladyboy.

While gender-bending was no more a part of the Chinese than the North American *WoW* experience, I sensed a more sober ethos among Chinese than among North Americans. In China, ladyboys were met with moral disapproval. North American chat was full of sexual fun up to and including sexual predation. For example:

- [14:32] Mrs. Pain: I do know we have fun with the new players
- [14:32] Mrs. Pain: that dont want to believe I am a woman
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: one of the guys I have known for awhile
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: tells them I am a sexual prediditor
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: looking for young boys
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: lol
- [14:33] Dan: lol
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: and I am a man
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: and dont believe me
- [14:33] Mrs. Pain: lol
- [14:34] Mrs. Pain: and chippie [a player] tells new ppl we are lizbian  
lovers

Understanding cross-cultural differences in expressions in sexually themed chat requires much more research, although it seems that discourse such as Mrs. Pain's, invoking homosexuality as a joke, would have been unlikely in China.

It is difficult to know the percentage of female *WoW* players in China. In a large Internet cafe in Beijing, we did a count. About 10 percent were female (6 out of 57). While there are undoubtedly many reasons for such a low rate of female participation, we were told that female players were less skilled at *WoW* and in particular they were poor at PvP play.

Why Chinese female players were less skilled at PvP play is a complex cultural question.

Wenjing Liang, one of my research assistants, suggested that traditional gender roles are still strong in China and displays of strength and competition are not traditionally feminine. In her words:

In Chinese traditional morality and culture, males are supposed to be active and be breadwinners, while females are supposed to be quiet and live at home. Additionally, females are more sensitive to feelings and

emotions, and they like activities such as watching movies, chatting, and shopping.

There was a marked preference for PvP among the players we talked to. Since most players appeared to be playing on PvP servers, it seems possible that *WoW* in China has been established as a masculine space in part because of its association with PvP, the more competitive, masculine form of the game. We counted the local servers available in Beijing (servers were divided regionally in China). There were 127 PvP servers and 20 PvE. We were only able to find one player on a PvE server out of the 40 we interviewed (he was visiting Beijing from Inner Mongolia). In North America, about half the servers were PvP. I have no data on whether women tended to choose them less often; further research is needed on this question.

It should be noted that there were many women in Chinese Internet cafes; the cafes themselves were not masculine spaces. Women were watching movies or instant messaging or engaged in other digital activities.

In addition to the vastly larger number of PvP servers, PvP was marked linguistically in China, referred to with the English "PK" or "player kill."<sup>22</sup> Players reported that they enjoyed PK because of its performative challenge and interest. PvE was "boring," a word used repeatedly in the interviews.

A male player remarked:

I think playing against computer characters is far less interesting than playing with the human brain. The competition between living players attracts me.

Another said:

One of the unique things about this game is that you can do PK, you can fight against somebody else.

Both male and female players told us that females were less skilled at PK and did not enjoy it. Qing, Mei, and Luli were female players:

Qing: In general girls don't like PK.

Mei: For girls playing PK, it is easy for them to lose a fight and be killed

because the skills of girls are really not good. My PK abilities are weak and I lose often.

Luli: Girls seldom PK with each other.

Male players in China also posited female players' generally lower level of skill at the game as a whole. A 25-year-old software engineer said:

There are some complicated controls in *WoW* so girls don't play as often.

Another said:

You can tell the difference between a male and female player by their playing style. There are probably about 10 percent that are women. Being a woman in the game, they are getting taken advantage of, because they are weaker.

A male player said, rather dubiously, of his girlfriend who played:

For female players, it is certain she is a good player, compared with other girls.

In China, the prevalence of PvP play, and its association with masculinity (akin to the masculinity of first-person shooter games reported by Kennedy, as well as Codex and Stupid Tall Hot Girl), seemed to render *WoW* less desirable to female players. Female players themselves agreed that they were less skilled at PK, and they declared less interest in it. Males felt that PvE was boring; their choice of PK was not intended to exclude women, although it may have had that effect. In North America, the greater presence of PvE servers possibly creates an opening for women since it appears that many women start playing *WoW* with a boyfriend, husband, or other family member. If more men begin to play in spaces more comfortable for women, women may be more likely to participate. This empirical question requires further data and analysis.

Of course it is not only women who come to *WoW* through members of their personal social networks. Men do, too. In China, the social experience of play seemed even more important than in North America for many

players. Thomas and Lang (2007) remarked on the unique role of *wang ba* in China, observing that the Internet cafe is one of the only places to "escape" parents and the rigors of the Chinese educational system. There seemed to be fewer opportunities for young people to socialize outside of school and home. In North America, starting in elementary school, myriad venues support such social life: sports associations and clubs (such as AYSO soccer or swim teams), church groups, after-school clubs, and even garage bands (which require garages, something absent in China). A Chinese player observed with approval that *WoW* was engineered to require collaboration:

The game requires collaboration, so we might say, why don't we go out to play together?

Another Chinese player noted that without collaboration the game cannot be played as successfully:<sup>3</sup>

In *WoW*, people who don't fit in with a group cannot get good equipment easily.

Several noted that collaboration and the competition of PK went together:

Chen: After I played *WoW* for awhile, I realized it's more meaningful than other games because of the collaboration. Even PK requires collaboration.

Liu: I like the team cooperation in battlegrounds.

Feng: I can play with other players. Anything can happen in the game. The Alliance might come in and attack you. It's exciting. I like the fact that you fight against real people and not the computer. Everyone controls his own character. You compete with each other.

A player who enjoyed raiding observed:

When raiding, there are so many people doing something together, which is very enjoyable.

One player compared Chinese games to *WoW*:

Individual heroism is more common in Chinese online games than in *WoW*. Many Chinese games focus more on the fighting between players. In *WoW*, players play together in raids and can fight against the monsters together.

Several players emphasized the team aspect of guilds, e.g.:

When joining a guild, you are not a single person but a team.

*WoW* enlivened out-of-game social life as well. One player said that he and his colleagues from work played together in the evening and that during the day at work, "We always have something to talk about." A player in Shanghai reported:

One of the people from the guild came to Shanghai recently. We all went out to dinner together and hosted him.

The sociability of *World of Warcraft* amplified the sociability of the *wang ba*, extending and reshaping it. Players shared not just the congenial social atmosphere of the cafe but an engaging virtual space that formed the basis of lively conversations and absorbing joint activity.

## Game Design and Cultural Borders

The popularity of a game designed in Southern California in a country like China, with its radically different history and culture, foregrounds the question of the power of a software artifact to organize human activity. In fundamental ways, *WoW* is *WoW* wherever it is. Were it not for language barriers, any *WoW* player could sit down and play on any server anywhere in the world. There appears to be a common core of participatory aesthetic experience that transcends national and cultural borders. The broad themes of performance, competition, visual immersion, and sociability that emerged in North America were also evident in China.

The appealing aesthetic experience of game play excited similar concerns in both cultures on the part of authorities who attempted to impose



Any *WoW* player would recognize this scene and the player controls. Screenshot taken in an Internet cafe, Beijing, Summer 2007.

disciplines to register their disapproval. Whether invoking "harmony" in China or "Christian values" in North America, the response of authoritarian elements in both societies was to intrude a watchful eye into the game space, to create a presence in order to continually make visible and reinforce certain cultural values.

The similarities in player and societal responses to *World of Warcraft* reposition exotic activities like Chinese gold farming as less remarkable than the qualities of an artifact capable of producing aesthetic experience that is cross-culturally "absorbing," "compelling," or "pleasurable," in the words of our play theorists. The similarities suggest new questions: Just how far can *WoW* stretch: to what cultures and across which boundaries? And why is *WoW* relatively weaker at crossing gender boundaries in both China and North America? Are there historical causes or is there something fundamentally masculine about the kind of visual-performative medium *WoW* is? And what is it about video games that attracts the attention of conservative cultural authorities?

At the same time that we examine cross-cultural similarities in *WoW*

play, we should be alert to variable cultural inflections in player experience. Such variability indicates that assumptions about virtual worlds as sites of gender-bending and flexible identities must be scrutinized with careful empirical data. There is no North American analog to the ladyboy meme in Chinese *WoW* play, with its tendency to suppress males playing female characters however much they would like to look at them. Chinese in-game economic innovations such as gold raids (and their degenerate form, black gold raids) demonstrate differential local cultural solutions to certain universal problems of the game. The Chinese “town crier” practice of denouncing unethical players in the General chat channel suggests the more pervasive fear of being cheated in China compared to North American practice, which located such matters as internal to guilds. The overwhelming choice for PvP play on the Chinese servers we examined was striking, possibly impacting female participation in *World of Warcraft* and linking to complex themes of competition, masculinity, and femininity.

In an article in *Science*, Bainbridge (2007) observed:

The present moment marks a major historical transition. Video games and computer games are in the process of evolving into something much richer, namely virtual worlds, at the same time that electronic games are surpassing the motion picture industry in dollar terms and beginning to cut into television.

*WoW*, and other social games, are emerging as global artifacts that appear to sustain, in vastly different cultural contexts, alternatives to, or displacements of, traditional media. The narcotized populace passively immersed in a spectacle of images seems to have given way, in part at least, to activity in digital worlds that create their own playful problems to be solved with cultural imaginings such as gold raids and Dragon Kill Point systems. That people behave badly in virtual game worlds, requiring player-developed social controls, is perhaps nothing more than an indication of the worlds’ status as, and footing in, real human social activity—both East and West.

## Coda

“Are you still studying *World of Warcraft*?” one of my colleagues at a conference questioned me rather sharply. He was not an anthropologist (who would not ask such a question, at least not in that tone), and his query reminded me of anthropology’s commitment to the long haul, and of my allegiance to activity theory and Dewey’s work grounded, as they are, in a belief in the fullness of time. Taking the long view has informed much of what I have written about *WoW* in this book: examining players’ own commitments to staying with the game to improve their characters; the development of activities like theorycrafting and modding that, over time, moved players into new relations with the game; understanding actions such as interpretation and construction in the context of larger moments of activity; seeing *WoW*’s Skinnerian rewards as thrilling in their own right but also aspects of a player’s bigger plans to move ahead in the game; investigating trajectories of “addiction” in which players reflexively shifted their activities, informed in part by community response to their predicaments; and considering national cultures and gender as they intersected the game at this particular time in history.

Part of my wholly unexpected enthusiasm for *World of Warcraft* arose from long-standing frustration with the passivity encouraged by our society, from television to high culture. I enjoy both but feel they are not “attributed their right proportion” to use Kallinkos’s phrase. Video games, at least good ones, engage and stimulate visual, cognitive, and social capacities. The visual-performative medium captures, in cheap commodity form, some of the satisfactions of exciting real life activities such as Burning Man or ballroom dancing—activities that require resources of time, money, and access to engage. Many of the babysitting parents, soldiers, soldiers’ wives,

students with little money, and chronically ill whom I met in-game were ace players; they had mastered a difficult game and worked it into lives which would not, at least in the immediate future, accommodate similarly engaging real life activities.

I see *World of Warcraft* as a work of art. Can a medium be an artistic production? I think it can, and that is just what Dewey was arguing with respect to "active aesthetic experience." Dewey spoke against the cordoning of art in cultural fortresses, a protocol requiring people to trudge, periodically, to museums, to pay homage in respectful, passive silence, to art such as paintings hanging on walls. While it is true that the black box may sometimes seal off game designs that can be altered only slightly more than famous paintings, the defining difference between the orderings of a museum and a video game is the game's production of active, performative experience. The beautifully arranged pixels on my *World of Warcraft* screen served as a backdrop for my activity. The pixels demanded no obeisance; they were, on the contrary, there to showcase me. The artwork in *WoW* exuded a touching humility; even in the far corners of the geography where play activity was light, the designs were often superb. I sometimes went fishing in the outermost areas of the Borean Tundra in part to see wonderfully rendered Viking boats plying their way to harbor. The boats were not only well drawn, but animated with a swiftness and distinctive movement that provided visual delight.

The rules in the black box are sometimes viewed as inducing quasi-fascistic dominance for which appropriate response is celebration of those who act in defiance of their power, or of those who move on the margins to smooth the dislocations that rules inevitably generate. While not denying the importance of the rebels hacking round the rules, and the game masters and guild leaders striving to assuage player dissatisfaction, these participants have submitted, in a sense, to the game and its rules, which orient their activity. The legitimacy of the rules is endorsed through the very engagement of these actors even as they probe for ways to exploit weaknesses or labor to relieve disappointments.

The supremacy of rules can be a good thing. Digital rules, in the context of excellent design, nurture us by providing reliable experience preserved through mechanical encapsulation and execution. Changes in rules must be handled carefully; we are still working through issues of governance

## Coda

and management of virtual worlds, finding ways to incorporate the many, varied voices of participants, as well as the corporate interests that bring us the worlds in the first place.

At the same time that digital rules powerfully direct and orient experience, there is significant participant contribution to experience in virtual worlds. In *World of Warcraft*, this contribution was particularly apparent in gender relations. The game itself was surprisingly feminist, but player culture masculinist. There was something really good for female players with the pretty outfits and baby pets and exquisite color palettes, but from the point of view of actual play activity, I would not call *WoW* "a playground for feminism" as Corneliusen (2008) did. There was far too much talk of rape and reference to players as fags and homos for that.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the focal concern with performance in *World of Warcraft* meant that female players had opportunities to unambiguously display mastery on a level playing field (see Wine 2008). Without the intrusion of the physical body suggesting a logic of segregation as in sports, video games offer opportunities for gender-neutral skilled play. Such play was not always the outcome, but there were many, many fine moments in *World of Warcraft* when it was.

Games are cultural entities, but they do not come to life until actually played. Games are things with formal rules and spaces; game play is the activity of playing. The two are different, and we must be aware of the subjective dispositions of those playing which determine whether a set of actions—even actions involving a cultural construct we define as a game—is play or not-play. Thus I developed a somewhat complicated notion of game play incorporating the work of several theorists that emphasized subjective disposition toward gaming activity as critical to understanding what it means to play a game.

Of course we are not searching for categorical purity (a sterile exercise bound to end in failure). Some game play, such as gambling in Crete (Malaby 2003) or cockfighting in Bali (Geertz 1977), seems playful in varying degrees; according to Malaby and Geertz, the displays of masculinity entangled in these activities drew on deep anxieties, and the need to constantly reassert masculine identity verged on a kind of social obligation. But the research also identified the deep pleasures of gambling and cockfighting, and these activities remind us that no activity is always manifest

in its purest form. Analytical categories are intended to slice into the chaos of something as complex as game play, not to suggest that activity can be pristinely realized in each instance.

Encountering *World of Warcraft* caused me to reexamine cultural categories of work and play. From my earliest *WoW* research, I saw that they were extremely salient categories for players. Nonetheless, the concepts are slippery. Is farming for six hours to obtain one set of gear really play? When you look closely, work and play are troublesome concepts; proposals to abandon them as analytical categories are tempting. But I think it useful to have ways to distinguish between, on the one hand, Ito's amateur anime producers, Steinkuehler's overachieving druids, eggheaded *WoW* theory-crafters, and players staying up late with their guild to finish off a difficult boss—and most of what we do in school and at work. School and work need not be activities we would rather just get through without performing the actions if we could—but they are. Most of the time. In explaining resistance to the adoption of gamelike environments at work (such as *Second Life*) one study participant said:

And some of the resistance is the fear that it looks like a game and therefore people are scared that it looks like they are messing around . . . You should have boring flat text and a spreadsheet in front of you, otherwise it's not work. They view work as a task placed in front of them—usually an onerous one. And usually in text or with some numbers. And anything else is obviously playing and playing is bad because it's not work.

Work is boring partly because we design it that way out of a belief that it *should* be boring.

Although the theories of Huizinga, Callois, and Dewey are from the last century (and Tom's fence two centuries ago), their thoughtful understandings continue to inform us of why players happily do "homework" and "research" on *World of Warcraft* but describe work and school as boring and soul crushing. The actions required do not satisfy in themselves, nor do they end in moments of limited perfection. Perhaps it is a dream to suggest that they might, but the research of education theorists studying games, as well as pioneers such as Bainbridge, who holds conferences in *World of Warcraft* (see Bohannon 2008) and *Second Life*, indicate that we are not yet finished defining what work and school might be.

There is much more to say about *World of Warcraft*—about guild politics, player forums, identity formation, hax and exploits, twinks, surveillance, game lingo, learning to play, knowledge management, *WoW* trading cards, and dozens of other *WoW*-related subjects. But as Borges's cartographers learned, the perfect map is perfectly useless. Lest "succeeding generations come to judge a map of such magnitude cumbersome, and . . . abandon it to the rigors of sun and rain," my labor draws to a close. I inscribe a few more marks, small moments of the research about which I felt "absurdly pleased," to borrow a phrase from one of Tolkien's creatures:

- [14:07] Dan: What do you like about the games you play, you already said you like making friends and what else?
- [14:07] Mrs. Pain: hmmm
- [14:08] Mrs. Pain: and its not just about making friends cause I do have a very busy social life and many friends
- [14:08] Mrs. Pain: I think its kinda an escape
- [14:08] Mrs. Pain: escape
- [14:09] Dan: escape from what?
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: time to relax and have fun
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: from the kids
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: my busy life
- [14:09] Dan: So kind of like a stress release?
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: I actually game instead of watching tv
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: ya
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: away to get away and have fun with some friends
- [14:09] Mrs. Pain: but I am still home for my kids
- [14:10] Mrs. Pain: and I am in the same room with my husband who is a gamer

Multiplayer video games have pushed "cyberspace," "hyperreality," "virtuality," the "metaverse," and "life on the screen" smack back into real life, generating hybrid physical-digital spaces of visual-performative activity. This blend is most obvious in the Internet cafes of China and elsewhere, but also present in dorms and homes in North America and Europe. Mrs. Pain explained the lure of the virtual in its manifestations as "fun" and "escape" while observing that she was "still home for my kids" and "in the same room with my husband." For her, games supplanted television, another

mode of escape, enabling an active engagement with friends and spouse. Dewey hoped that aesthetic experience would permeate ordinary life. Mrs. Pain's gaming is perhaps an exemplar of the kind of active aesthetic experience situated in an everyday environment that Dewey spoke for.

A young female warlock who regularly topped the damage charts in battlegrounds wrote of a possible future for video games. She produced the following abstract for a paper for her MBA program (Ly 2008):

The popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft*, is used as a tool to discuss new developments concerning computers in human behavior. MMORPGs are relatively a new breed of computer games. Some critics may be skeptical of how computer games relate to real-life situations in business and work environments. However, this paper demonstrates that by examining MMORPGs, insightful considerations can be revealed involving computers in human behavior in the following two areas: 1) how virtual scenarios can be applicable as the best kind of job training for managers and employees and 2) how human behavior and interaction can be studied through MMORPGs. *World of Warcraft* incorporates aspects that exist in the realities of business and work environments. These aspects include hierarchical organizational structures, the specific duties each player is expected to perform, the management of teams to accomplish common goals, and the development of interpersonal skills as well as relationships.

A generation schooled in navigating the social hierarchies of guilds, meeting the challenges of pulling remote players together for coordinated teamwork, taking seriously the need for individual competence, and learning to make friends in cyberspace is positioning itself for a world in which work becomes increasingly global, travel is restricted by the disappearance of fossil fuels, and people are happy to have a good-looking avatar stand in for them in colorful virtual spaces more stimulating than the visually dead cubicles of many corporate work spaces.

And from China:

Chen: I learned several things about the West. *WoW* has a Western story, which is different from Eastern stories and history . . . The game belongs to the whole Western culture. Mages, druids, and so on originate from

Western myths, and are relevant to the whole Western myth of the story. Some *WoW* races like gnomes, dwarves, and elves, and also dragons, are described in European myths.

BN: Doesn't China have dragons?

Chen: Dragons are different with us. Western dragons are evil while Chinese dragons stand for happiness.

Games are venues for unselfconscious cross-cultural encounters afforded by software artifacts that embody but at the same time transcend culture. Just as Chen found interest in encountering European dragons and the novelty of gnomes and dwarves, so may we in the West delight in knowing of happy Chinese dragons. They may come to us as future commodities in video games, just as mythological creatures of the West have made their way to China through *World of Warcraft*.

Language travels in games, too. Rea taught children English in Korea in 2006–7. He reported the appearance of an English gaming term in *Sudden Attack*, a first-person shooter produced by GameHi, a Korean entertainment company, and its subsequent deployment in quite a different context (Rea 2009):

[I was] surprised . . . when one of my third-grade students yelled “fire in the hole!” before launching a ball of paper across the room at one of his classmates, mimicking the tossing of a grenade in *Sudden Attack*.

Finally there is the need to remember the sharp edge of play against ordinary life—its improbability, even absurdity. Much academic scholarship on play is so serious, so removed from the lightness of play, as to render the phenomenon under study nearly unrecognizable. When reading learned treatises that treat multiplayer video games as objects of study (such as this one), it is good to keep in mind that no matter how much we analyze games as spaces in which to create new work relations, as possible platforms for education, or as encounters with other cultures, contemporary multiplayer video games captivate because they are the site of a great deal of good old-fashioned frolic and tomfoolery.

Such as the following.

My son Anthony, his fiancée Jackie, and some of their friends started playing *World of Warcraft*. My son emailed me:

Jackie was jealous that our friend Duke's character Kwimbae has more gold than our elves (Kurhah and Zaurak), so she sent him this message via WoW mail . . .

Dear good sir

I am Princess Wanamoni, the only daughter of the late King Itake Yomoni of Ashenvale. My father was poisoned to death by a rival Horde prince while on a business outing in Orgrimmar. My father thought Me so special took good care, but now I have no one and no money. Please Help me good sir send 50 Gold to my associate, Kurhah. she will invest the money in a special account in stormwind and you will receive 1063%.

Such silliness is delightful, original, and productive of what Dewey called “remaking the material of experience.”

Let me end with the lunacy of playing *WoW*, its comfortable, goofy, intimate, jokey, unserious, informal surface. An early morning exchange, as I logged my priest for a moment before work, made me smile. I was greeted by Gilarye, a young player who had me on his friends list:

Gilarye whispers: help! i'm dieing

To Gilarye: hey gil

Gilarye whispers: come save me!

To Gilarye: i'm just on for a sec camping a vendor

Gilarye whispers: \*gasp\*

Gilarye whispers: \*slap\* yr mean!

To Gilarye: laters gil, have a good day :D

## Notes

### Chapter One

1. *WoW* had 70 levels of play during the period of research reported here. To avoid confusion for those who do not play and might talk to others who do, I mention that there are 80 levels of play, the state of the game at the time of writing.

2. See Damer 2009 for an account of the coinage of the term *virtual world*.

3. Copy for an online ad for the first-person shooter *Combat Arms* read, “Head shots are tough, but nut shots are harder.” The ad included an animated visual.

4. If you look closely, you may find a few small, cartoony blood drips but very few. The comparison here is to games in which such elements are an important part of the gut-level visual stimulation of the game. *WoW* has plenty of weapons, including guns; I don’t find them scary, although it could be argued that some of the larger ones are quite noticeable. Often weapons are “enchanted,” lending them sparkles or glows, diminishing realism, and rendering them visually benign. Imagine a machine gun in a first-person shooter with colorful sparkles!

### Chapter Four

1. I discuss raiding quite a lot because I was in a raiding guild and I found it fascinating. But player forums were replete with discussions of how to handle performative challenges in all *WoW* contexts, including soloing. For example, the following is a portion of a lengthy post on thottbot.com explaining how to solo the quest Stranglethorn Fever. It indicates the precision with which players analyzed (and wrote about) performance:

After several failed attempts, I managed to complete this quest solo as a level 48 hunter. It was not easy, but I'll share some tips that I have learned (the hard way . . .). I went with my wolf pet. His dps is a bit less than an offense-centric pet, but he seems

16. Videogamesblogger headlined a post “*World of Warcraft* hits 11 million users worldwide! Making it the 75th biggest country in the world.” The population of *WoW* was considerably larger than that of Denmark or Dubai, as well as a great many other countries. See <http://www.videogamesblogger.com/2008/10/28/world-of-warcraft-hits-11-million-users-worldwide-making-it-the-75th-biggest-country-in-the-world.htm>. Last accessed March 2009. (See also Bainbridge 2007.)

17. For those familiar with the game, during 3.0, when my post-Scarlet Raven guild had done everything but Sarth +3, we went to Sunwell and wiped repeatedly with a full 25-man raid because we had not studied the strategies.

18. Those familiar with the game will recall that nostalgia runs began well before the Achievements system made it instrumental to go back to old dungeons.

19. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) described *WoW* as a spectacle, but they referred to players watching other players. I refer to the game itself.

20. *Hawt* is a playful spelling of “hot,” a term connoting approval of the visual design of the gear in this context.

21. Brecht and others of course attempted to unify audience and performers; perhaps *WoW* is a populist realization of that impulse made possible through the affordability of digital technology.

22. Even professional architects gave *World of Warcraft* high marks for the visual design of its buildings. One architect wrote: “The stunning diversity of buildings of Azeroth secures it the top spot [in a competition for best architectural design in video games]. Towering Gothic structures recall the ‘dreaming spires’ of Oxford given a subversive geometrical revamp. The architecture of the Blood Elves, on the other hand, has softer, more organic influences. Similar to Gaudi’s Parc Guell or Sagrada Familia, nature is expressed in stylised form—the very essence of Art Nouveau.” See <http://www.fastcompany.com/blog/cliff-kuang/design-innovation/architecture-video-games-top-10>.

23. Fan culture is vibrant, but in assessing the impact of television, it is undeniable that most people just sit in front of the TV. Television is appealing in part because it is passive, demanding little of us—a comfort when we are tired, depressed, or in need of downtime. Although we may worry about those who seem to need too much such time, it is puritanical to insist that television be active and social when what it is good at is helping us let go.

### Chapter Five

1. “Lol” is an acronym for “laugh out loud” and is a common chat term. It does not actually mean “laugh out loud” but rather connotes a smile, or friendliness, or irony, depending on the context. If someone is actually laughing out loud they would more likely type “rofl,” which stands for “roll on the floor laughing.” I am not sure what they would type if they were actually rolling on the floor laughing.

2. Huizinga (1950) has been critiqued for his claim that play “has no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (see Stevens 1978). Some theorists throw out the

baby (Huizinga’s good work) with the bathwater (this particular claim). His good work should be recognized, but Huizinga was clearly wrong on this issue; it has been shown that even animals deprived of play suffer (see Stevens 1978).

3. Turner (1982) observed that the word *entertainment* shares a notion of separate ness, being derived from the Old French *entretenir*, “to hold apart.”

4. Notions such as the Protestant work ethic rankle a bit; in our global economy, work ethics are as likely to have arisen in a village in Mexico or an urban center in Asia as anywhere else. Suggesting that player activity arises from such constructs seems problematic even when used metonymically.

5. Golub (2007) recounted the incensed reactions of players to a reduction in the size of shoulder armor worn by the Draenei race. Three hundred forty-one messages of protest were posted to an official Blizzard player forum. One player wrote, “[Y]ou can no longer pretend you are surprised when we are unhappy . . . This matter is . . . purely cosmetic, but it makes us regret our choices at character creation. We work very hard for the items that you are ruining and we do not appreciate it.”

6. Not all players farmed; it was an activity for serious players. I am responding to the dialogue introduced by Yee, Poole, and Rettberg, which identified farming (and related video game activities) as in need of explanation.

7. Players complained about the need for too many raid consumables—it was massively time consuming to prepare them—and, in the cycle of feedback/change discussed in chapter 4, Blizzard eventually reduced the quantities needed. I thought it was a good decision, preserving social capital and the investment in professions such as alchemy many players had made but reducing the time needed for farming.

8. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) used the phrase “alone together” to describe *World of Warcraft* sociality. Though the phrase appears to play off Huizinga, it is about something else altogether, denoting a statistic Ducheneaut et al. generated showing that players are in formal groupings 30 to 40 percent of the time (being “alone” the rest of the time). “Alone together” does not, as I understand it, engage arguments about the magic circle.

9. Instances are part of the design of other games as well.

10. Not all raiding dungeons were belowground. But a lot of them were, including such *WoW* archetypes as Deadmines, Scholomance (how I loved Scholo; I remember the descent well because I had to shackle the ghost at the bottom of the stairs), Molten Core, and the Coiffang instances. Many instances were designed around vaults, sanctums, and lairs.

11. I.e., a space away from home and work. Third spaces in RL include bars, beauty salons, and bingo nights.

### Chapter Six

1. Although I do not know for sure, I interpret this player’s comment on *Second Life* as a reference to its reputation for being dominated by adult-themed activity (see Bardzell and Odom 2008).

### Chapter Seven

1. There are various ways to define game mechanics (see Sicart 2008), but for purposes of this chapter I am interested in the ways in which game rules produce outcomes.

2. Over 4,000 mods were available at curse.com and wowinterface.com (mod distribution sites) according to a count we did on December 8, 2008 (see Kow and Nardi 2009).

3. Karl Isenberg's real name is used with permission.

4. Mods comprised scripted programming files written in XML and Lua. Lua was used to specify functions. XML specified user interface elements. Mod users downloaded the files into a folder in the game directory where they were read when the game began. See Takhteyev (2009) on Lua.

5. Decursing was burdensome when many players were afflicted. Instead of seeing players' health restored after issuing a healing spell (the payoff for healers), the healer saw only the removal of the debuff—less satisfying. Members of damage classes that could decurse, such as mages, were forced to stop doing what they loved—damage—in order to remove debuffs.

6. Although outside the study period, in April 2009, Blizzard established firmer guidelines for mod authors, partly in response to the appearance of advertising in some mods. The commercial aspects of modding remind us that "community participation" is complex; participants have variable motives (see <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=15864747207&sid=1>).

### Chapter Eight

1. I searched for sociolinguistic analyses of gendered talk in video games and found little. Wright et al. (2002) constructed a typology of talk in *Counter-Strike* that included "Explicit gendered, racialized or homophobic talk," but they gave no examples and did not discuss or analyze the talk.

2. I want to reiterate that I knew the gender of guildmates through voice chat.

3. Williams et al. (2006) used the metaphor of the tree house to describe social life in *World of Warcraft*. I build on their notion but am focused here on gendered aspects of sociality which are perhaps not so benign as those of generic tree houses.

4. Wine (2008) discussed male rhetorical practice on a *WoW* forum, observing the aggressive-submissive postures of male posters.

5. My son agreed that being made the exception rendered this exchange one of fundamental inequality, but he observed that I could have scored some points by replying with something like, "Yeah, send me a picture of your balls, and then I'll have your email address." This rejoinder did not occur to me at the time.

6. I am indebted to Celia Pearce for her insight on the exaggeration present in masculinist discourse in games such as *WoW*.

7. Thelwall (2008) studied MySpace users and found that in the United States males used stronger language than females. This is consistent with my findings. But in the

United Kingdom, younger males and females exhibited similar patterns of language use, possibly due to the development of a female "ladette" culture involving heavy drinking.

8. My data concern activities in heterosexual guilds and my general observations of gendered activity in *WoW*, which were of heterosexual activity.

9. The "sex change operation" happened in my post- Scarlet Raven guild, but I report the incident as it was so apropos.

10. I am referring to dynamics in guilds and pickup groups; it is possible that some newbie male players pretended to be real life females. I don't have any data on that.

11. I use the term "safe" in an emotional sense; see Taylor (2003a) for a discussion of females' sense of freedom and safety in roaming anywhere in a video game without fear of physical harm, something they could not do in real life. Such roaming puts males and females at the same risk of in-game dangers, again a departure from real life.

12. Games such as *Lineage* and *Ragnarock* have lighter color palettes than *World of Warcraft*, although *WoW* is bright compared to the games described by Fullerton et al. (2007).

13. As a Blizzard product, *WoW*'s gendered elements are particular to *WoW*. Blizzard also produces masculinist games such as *Starcraft*. I have not played *Starcraft* but watched the video trailer several times during my two days at BlizzCon. It was both funny and sad. Funny because the two main characters managed to package up every imaginable hypermasculine stereotype dredged from the bowels of popular culture, and sad because so many men must identify at some level with the characters. Of course that's funny, too.

14. The feminine robes of the male mage provoked humor and even inspired a satirical player video, *Big Blue Dress*. The vocal of an original song laments the sorry state of affairs faced by male mages, asking why "A man of my stature should have to wear a dress" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqO7zEWu0W0>).

### Chapter Nine

1. The Internet cafe speaks to the continuing importance of the large-screen format. Despite the affordability, and hence ubiquity, of cell phones, it is enjoyable to watch movies, play video games, and interact with multiple applications on a bigger screen—exactly the activities we observed in Internet cafes in China.

2. At an art gallery in Beijing, we met a Chinese artist, Caixiaoxiao, who used "PK" as a theme in his art. One of his works was a large picture in which a headshot of Mu'ammar al-Gadhafi was juxtaposed with one of the artist, both images of the same size. It was titled, in English, *PK PK, Caixiaoxiao's Political PK*. We asked the artist how to interpret the picture. He told us that interpretation was up to the viewer, but that he saw himself in a kind of competition with al-Gadhafi. In the picture, both men are wearing hats with the Communist star, al-Gadhafi the traditional ethnic hat he is often photographed in, and the artist a Mao cap. The young Chinese research assistants who had taken me to the gallery did not recognize al-Gadhafi, so the work had a greater impact on me. The artist appeared to be in his late thirties.

3. This sentiment on the need to collaborate was common to both Chinese and North American players. Dreadlock, a young player I interviewed, connected the fun of *WoW* to opportunities for meeting people. (The :D icon means grin.)

To Dreadlock: what do you like about the game?

Dreadlock whispers: its fun :D

To Dreadlock: right! but why?

Dreadlock whispers: cant feal lonly while playing it!

Dreadlock whispers: to meet people, etcw

Dreadlock whispers: i love instances

To Dreadlock: why do you love them?

Dreadlock whispers: because they make it so you MUST group

Dreadlock whispers: its not an option

To Dreadlock: how do you find people to group with?

Dreadlock whispers: advertising in the chat channels, guild and asking my friends

Dreadlock whispers: also instances are an opportuniy to meet people

#### Coda

1. Cornelussen played on a European server; things may be much different there. More research is needed.

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