TOWARD A THICKER DESCRIPTION OF VIRTUAL WORLDS AS SITES OF DEEP PLAY: TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION OF THE EXPRESSION OF INTENT AND INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT'S NORTH AMERICAN SERVERS.

by

John P Lunsford
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts
Anthropology

Committee:

_____ Director

_____

_____

Susan R. Trencher _____ Department Chairperson

Jamie S. Cooper _____ Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: _December 4, 2013_ Fall Semester 2013
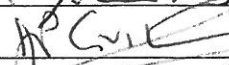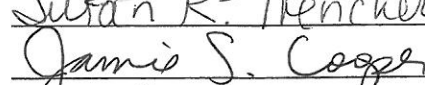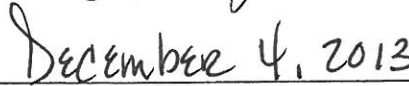George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Toward a Thicker Description of Virtual Worlds as Sites of Deep Play: Technological Mediation of the Expression of Intent and Interpretation of Meaning in World Of Warcraft's North American Servers.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

by

John P Lunsford
Bachelor of Science
Old Dominion University, 2006

Director: Linda J. Seligmann, Professor
Department of Anthropology

Fall Semester 2013
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

DEDICATION

I travelled to Germany to find Boas, and Bali to find Geertz. Now I look within the digital to help find myself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Battlegrounds .... BGs
Crowd Control CC
Die in a Fire .... diaf
Damage Per Second .... DPS
EverQuest.. EQ
Experience Points..xp
First Person Shooter..FPS
Graphic User Interface... GUI
Hit Points .... HP
In Real Life ....IRL
Kill On Sight .... KoS
Kajaro Trading Company ....KTC
Massively Multiplayer Online ....MMO
Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game...............................MMORPG
Non-Player Characters..NPC
Off Tank.. OT
Player Characters ....PC
Pick up group ....PUG
Player Versus Environment ....PVE
Player Versus Player.. PVP
Role-Playing ....RP
Role-Playing Game...RPG
Role-Playing Player Versus Environment .... RPPVE
Teamspeak .... TS
User Interface... UI
Ventrillo ....Vent
Voice over Internet Protocol.. VoIP
World of Warcraft.. WoW

ABSTRACT

TOWARD A THICKER DESCRIPTION OF VIRTUAL WORLDS AS SITES OF
DEEP PLAY: TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION OF THE EXPRESSION OF INTENT
AND INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT'S NORTH
AMERICAN SERVERS.

John P Lunsford, M.A.

George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Dr. Linda J. Seligmann

This thesis seeks to articulate the diverse nature of experience, expression, and

interpretation found amongst participants in Virtual Worlds by exploring the impact of

technology on their production. Using World of Warcraft as an example, I draw upon

theories that examine the implication of incorporating technology into society and link

them to other theories that explore the intersection of disparate cultural structures. By

bridging these perspectives and routing them through a brief historical account of

communication technologies situated as *sine qua non* to the evolution of games as

complex sites of study, I expose technology's influence as necessitating an expansion of

the tactics of ethnographic inquiry and propose a reworking of the depth and breadth of

both their exploration and analysis. Through an implementation of these new techniques,

this study utilizes interviews, surveys, and participant observation to explore the potential

for this approach to more thickly describe World of Warcraft and validate technology's

role in shaping/directing agency, mediating experience, and facilitating depth.

CHAPTER ONE

It was Fall 2011 when I enrolled in the last of my graduate courses and undertook

an independent study to explore potential topics for my Master's thesis. During that time,

one book in particular was recommended to me, Bonnie Nardi's *My Life as a Night Elf*

Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft (2010). The work was an

informative example of what could be achieved when anthropology and new

developments in internet culture entwine. It was an interesting application of classical

anthropological methods and data collection, written in such a way that helped bridge the

gap between anthropology and the public. Along with the writings of authors such as

Tom Boellstorff (2010), Sherry Turkle (2005, 2006), and Celia Pierce (2009), Nardi's

work helped legitimize virtual worlds as viable sites for scientific inquiry.

However, despite the rigor with which Nardi investigated World of Warcraft

(WoW) her work, as well as others, underestimated technology's role in mediating

representation, expression, and interpretation, which resulted in generalizations that

under-represent the diverse cultural ecology in virtual worlds.

Nard's isolated experiences with dedicated end game progression raiding guilds,

one sector among many within the raiding subculture, which itself is but one subculture

amongst many in WoW,[1] caused her to induce that the nature of participation in WoW

was selfish and self-centered. In reference to a letter sent by a guild member to the rest of

the guild explaining her reason for leaving as a lack of reciprocity despite her friendships

and efforts to learn and help with guild activities, Nardi (2010:65) wrote:

> The guild could have slowly accommodated the less geared or skilled
> members. But such a solution would have abrogated the logic of the game,
> which was to perform to one's fullest ability. *WoW* was a voluntary space
> of performative play, not a place in which players wanted to spend hours
> helping the less fortunate…because they violated the spirit of free play
> and the very reason to play the game, which was to perform and see new
> content.

This passage resonated with me as contrary to many of my own experiences in virtual

worlds. It used experience formed from within one group and offered a generalization

that did not account for the possibility that the priorities of players might differ or change

and suggested that by not participating in that vary narrow way meant that I, and many

others that I have encountered over the years, were somehow playing it wrong. The

conclusion that the nature of WoW can only be performance based fails to acknowledge

the diverse nature of motivations or "initiatives, interests, and desires" (Castells 2010:

xxviii) that people bring into virtual worlds, motivations that inform on their "very reason

to play the game". Taken from Nardi's example, many people in her guild prioritized

performance mastery or to "perform to one's fullest ability", however, the individual who

wrote the letter's primary interest lay in the expansion and maintenance of her social

---

[1] Subcultures in WoW are informal and loosely organized around aspects of the game that players deem central to their desired experience. Common central activities in WoW are social, competitive and, content oriented. See also Nardi 2010: 13; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008: 238; Boellstorff 2010: 7-8, 27, 64; Fischer 2003: 274;

networks, with the performative aspect finding purchase as a secondary or tertiary motivation for participation. To make the claim that one motivation drives all players with equal weight overlooks how actions, despite technology making them appear the same through "blackboxing" (Latour 1999), may be symbolically different. This kind of overgeneralization is what Fischer cautions as a "reduction of all to the same" (2005:55).

The insight that motivations can differ stems from my active entrenchment in gaming culture, including virtual worlds, since 1994. The role of games in my life has evolved as my needs have changed. In 1999, I used them to escape the teenage angst of high school; while teaching in China in 2007, I used virtual worlds to connect with friends and family overseas, combat culture shock, and allay homesickness; in 2011, I used them as sites to study why other people chose to be there; today I use them to augment a limited social life due to my busy schedule. Despite these firsthand experiences which demonstrate that not only the meaning of interactions change but my reasons for choosing to exist in those spaces changed as well, I was unable to find literature in the current scholarship on the study of games that addressed the linkages between meaning systems and technologies that I knew to exist.

This study drew upon my years of experience *in situ* inside virtual worlds to assist in calibrating anthropological theories to investigate WoW as an emergent site of deep play and leveraged my professional experience as a programmer to understand technology's role in mediating how individuals construct and express intent, and interpret meaning in WoW. In this way I explored the symbolism embedded in communication of both conversation and action through an in-depth analysis of data gathered from hours of

interaction and observation of activity in WoW supplemented by over 15 years of

experience in this game and many others like it. The framework of this analysis draws on

theories of deep play and thick description as well as technological and technical

mediation to better investigate and understand how space, place, and presence are shaped.

Together these concepts contend that games such as WoW should be reconceptualized as

sites of deep play and expose complexities mediation imposes upon academic inquiry into

such sites. The aim of this research was to investigate barriers to understanding that

technology creates from the perspectives of both participant and researcher. By doing so

these findings contribute to the existing literature involving the investigation and analysis

of WoW and other virtual worlds in order to arrive at a more descriptive and accurate

understanding of the potential breadth of human interaction in WoW.

My purpose in this thesis is to expand the application of current research

methodologies and analysis in order to recognize and more precisely represent the intent

and experiences of a larger, more diverse group of people that participates in WoW. By

doing so I hope to broaden the understanding of the depth of social interactions that exists

in virtual worlds and explore technology's role in lending shape into the analysis of

virtual worlds and other technologically-influenced sites of study.

Deep Play and Mediation

Geertz uses the idea of deep play and depth to distinguish the symbolic investment

of status gambling from the shallower money gamblers in Balinese cockfighting. While

symbolic wagers still have a necessary monetary component, they are, as Geertz puts it,

"a secondary matter" (1973:440) whose primary focus is "esteem, honor, dignity, respect

– in a word…status" (1973:433). For money gamblers the primacy of financial ambitions pulls focus, sometimes entirely, away from matters of status only to refocus, sometimes obsessively, on personal fortune. Even in its Balinese application, Geertz introduces the idea that depth is the variability of meaning.

The interpretative and symbolic depth of the Balinese cockfight so as to make it "deep" derives not only from the existence of more symbolically dense encounters, but the ability for those encounters to exist simultaneously layered atop the fights' shallower interpretations (i.e., money gambling). The overlapping and intersecting motivations of both individuals and social groups allow for cockfights to be a place of varied depth, and the utility with which individuals choose to participate in them inform on the degree of depth in their symbolic significance.

Michael Fischer pulls the concept of deep play out of the confines of Balinese society and reinterprets it to be more globally encompassing where "deep play refers to cultural sites where multiple levels of structure, explanation, and meaning intersect and condense, including cultural phantasmagoria that ground and structure the terrain on which reason, will and language operate but cannot contain" (Fischer 2003:22). Fueling deep play is the interaction of intersecting individual experiences and cultural contexts. For Marilyn Strathern, culture is "the way analogies are drawn between things, in the way certain thoughts are used to think others. Culture consists in the images which make imagination possible, in the media with which we mediate experience" (1992:33) (Dumit 2012). If this is the case, then cultural sites of deep play employ both the imagination of meaning to create experience informed by cultural forces and previous experiences as

well as individual agency to choose how and with which types of media people choose to mediate experiences. According to Strathern "all the artefacts we make and the relationships we enter into have in that sense cultural consequences, for they give form and shape to the way we think about other artefacts, other relationships" (1992b:33). In this way, both artifacts and the experiences conducted through them shape, or meditate, the interpretation of future experiences.

Latour (1994) argues that the artifacts or intermediaries through which actions are conveyed mediate experiences that travel through them by exposing actions to the inherent motivations built into their architecture. The motivation desires of those that conceived it thereby exposing any interactions conducted through the artifact to the influence of those motivations. In this way, mediating technologies build "assumptions into their architecture" (Dumit 2004:81) such that logics and grammars embedded in the mechanical or programmatical aspect of an artifacts' architecture are designed to shape the way they are intended to be used by confining actions taken through them to limited and standardized output.

However, the logics and grammars that comprise the architectural assumptions and their effects are masked through a process Latour refers to as *blackboxing* which is "a process that makes the joint production of actors and artifacts entirely opaque" (1999:183) such that the actors agency cannon be decoupled from the artifact's influence in the output of this join production. The notion of *backboxing* views the success of technology-the-intermediary as a contributor to its own invisibility. As technology enables people's interactions through it to become more effortless and, by all

6

appearances, conveys the users' intended meaning accurately, then users of technology

care less about technology's role as an intermediary and only focusing on the inputs and

outputs of the engagement (Latour 1999). This becomes especially true as technology

becomes more complex. While it may have been less difficult to understand how the

telegraph mediated the experience of communication, smartphones today are considerably

more complicated and as such the processes and technologies they employ to facilitate

interactions have become much more opaque. With its operations more obfuscated,

technology's role in mediating experience has similarly become difficult to discern

causing technology's effect as a mediator to be hidden by its own successes (including

convenience) as an intermediary. These successes mask the mechanical and

programmatical limitations of logics and grammars that impose structure upon

experiences enacted through it. As such, when viewing the jointly-produced output of

interactions enacted through technology, it is difficult to separate, as both an observing

researcher and participant, the original intention of the actor from the mediating effects of

the artifact.

This is especially relevant for digital environments like virtual worlds. In these

instances, the "assumptions" are not social constructions; instead they are mechanical

conditions (though they represent the social influences of their designers) that dictate the

range of vocal, aural, and kinesthetic experiences available. In WoW, people cannot

participate in the digital environment unless they allow their actions to be mediated and

filtered through these architectural assumptions embedded in the artifacts of computers

and in the programming of virtual worlds. In this confluence of technologies needed to

access WoW computers influence the speed and definition with which a person accesses and digitally renders the landscape of WoW as a virtual space. The computational logics and grammars built into the architecture of the programming limit the actions and language players can use when navigating the social and architectural strata of the game. Imposing itself on this computer-host interaction is the technology of the connection. It directs the flow of information, of how much of the computers computational capacity is linked to the virtual world. If the connection is poor (sluggish or slow) the quality of the computer matters less as the connection affords it less access to the host. Likewise a good connection only matters as much as there is a computer that is up to the task of rendering its information. The successful integration of connection, computer and host space are required to participate in WoW.

However, the effects of technological mediation are difficult to distinguish from an individual's agency and decision making process as its "blinders, limitations and contradictions are industriously and productively sutured so as not to be visible" (Fischer 2005:60). This is particularly so if users are unfamiliar with the architecture of the virtual world's programming and the limits it imposes on actions and language that people have access to when interacting with each other. Additionally, virtual worlds are further complicated by an "illusion of familiarity" (Crease 1993:561) where the technological architecture embedded in the world creates a sense of uniformity through a graphical representation that is the same for everyone, belying the complex and varied existence of motivations. The apparent mass uniformity is part of how virtual world's architecture mediated experience. It organizes the diverse technologies of computer and connection by

filtering them through programming whose output is a display of mass uniformity in graphically rendered form. This process accommodates many locations and computer types, organizes them, and allows them to interact in the same space (Hannerz 1990). However, this organization and uniform participation makes it difficult to distinguish among the intentions of its players.

This masking is not only relevant for participants of WoW as they project their own intentions and interpret the meaning of other participant's behaviors, but equally relevant for the researchers who strive to decipher the symbolic meaning of social interactions and interpret the role of "agency and decision making" (Fischer 2009:12) as it negotiates technological mediation.

The existence of this subtle masking mediation also necessitates a reworking of ethnographic methods to incorporate technology's influence into the already complex interpretation of "people with different value structures living in the same social space" (Fischer and Marcus 1999:xxvi). Through the masking that takes place in virtual worlds technology attempts to allow for similar experience but in doing so creates the illusion of uniformity that makes all the participants' actions' appear similar. Because of this players interpret the actions they observe as if the intentions of the actor mirror their own despite the potential for diversity to be represented. As a result, ethnographic methods need to be expanded and broaden research tactics and modes of analysis to acknowledge the projection of mass uniformity and allow for modes of analysis to accommodate a potential for diversity that is masked by technologically-imposed homogeneity in virtual

worlds that are unconfined by culture, locality, experience, or access to resources (Fischer and Marcus 1999).

Marcus observed that "objects of study are becoming more transcultural such that the demands on the fieldworker for depth and breadth are much greater than ever before" (1998:247). To address the demands of depth ethnography needs to "develop translation and mediation tools for making visible the difference of interests, access, power, needs, desires, anxieties, and philosophical perspectives" (Fischer 2005:55). It needs to incorporate a familiarity of the technological conditions inherent in the architecture of sites of study into explorations of socio-cultural discourses and trans-cultural representation (Fischer 2009). Such a familiarity allows the researcher the opportunity to both better see the depth of social interactions and to articulate those depths thickly. The term "thick" alludes to awareness that the same action (e.g., a wink) as it is "produced, perceived, and interpreted" and can have different meanings, such as a wink or a blink. To the ethnographer each person's interpretation holds value as it is reflective of their intentions and the cultural contexts that inform them (Geertz 1973:6-7). Without the knowledge of the technological architecture that shapes actions in the space, however, a researcher may struggle to see its potential for depth, and likewise lack the knowledge and awareness to represent the environment and its participants accurately and thickly. A thick description of an inaccurate representation of the activities of the space is just as counterproductive as a thin description that correctly, but shallowly, interprets the breadth of experiences in the environment. These shifts in methodological practice would help adapt ethnography, and the ethnographer, to better explore virtual worlds, whereas just

slotting "new developments into the categories of the past" (Fischer 2005:61) could result in an ineffective – or worse, misrepresentative – investigation of virtual worlds as mediated spaces.

Additionally, to further strengthen ethnography's applicability to mediated spaces, there is a need for ethnographers to re-envision the meaning of multisited research. While many case studies delve into the culture of virtual worlds (Nardi 2010, Boellstorff 2010, Pierce 2009, Bainbridge 2010, Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008), they underestimate the technologically influenced shift in the nature of multisitedness. In these works the multisited approach is synonymous with an investigation of multiple sites within the same space and perceived as sufficient for pursuing ethnography of a virtual world. However, for example if researching a physical society, an anthropologist would not consider gathering data from different locations in the same village to be multisited, and the same principle needs to be applied to virtual worlds. A researcher's presence in a physically different place when collecting data or at a different location in the same virtual world does not constitute multisitedness. To "move beyond slogans of multisitedness" (Fischer 2005:60) studies in mediated virtual worlds need to be conducted both horizontally and vertically to comprehensively explore how cultures, technologies, localities, and other forces influence the nature of experience in WoW. The horizontal component of a study should be conducted across multiple sites in the same virtual space complemented by a vertical investigation that crosses through both digital and physical spaces in an effort to understand how the forces that influence a physical persona (e.g., physicality, worldview, social and cultural exposures, experiences) impacts their digital representation. As the

11

barriers between physical and digital have become porous such that it becomes nearly effortless to traverse between the two (Castells 2010, Shirky 2009, Kallinkos 2009), ethnographers need to recognize that the effects of physical and digital influences are not isolated from one another. The porous nature of digital and physical barriers creates the need for vertical investigation that passes through both, and considers both, so as to see how these impact experience and tools of ethnographic inquiry need adjusting to explore virtual worlds in a way necessary for their deep articulation.

Technologies and Social Experience

Societies have a long history of incorporating technology into their ways of operating (Kallinkos 2004:237). The technological advances assimilated into existing social structures are built upon a framework established by technologies that came before it. It is not surprising then to realize that the near instantaneous adoption of technology occurs without fully understanding its effect on the human social experience (Shirky 2009). To understand how recently adapted technologies influence social spaces involves an understanding of how the previous technologies influenced social experiences.

Such is the case with games as virtual worlds. In order for games to become sites of deep play they need technologies that make accessible new depths of experiences. For this reason, virtual worlds are built upon technologies that inspire new methods of communication, cause a revaluation of time, space, and place, expand the scope of social networks, renew modes of presence and the self, and contribute to symbolism embedded in the projection of agency. Without the contributions of these technologies, virtual worlds would not have existed and games like WoW would never have emerged as sites

of deep play. However, to establish WoW as a site of deep play, the technologies that comprise its framework must be understood in the contexts of their own effect on social experiences.

Communication

Advancements in communication technologies continually shape social experience (Kallinkos 2009, Castells 2010). They encourage the expansion of social networks, retooling of how space, time, and place are perceived, and shifting how presence is conceptualized. Communication's incorporation into games helps facilitate the integration of the other contributions. The telegraph is an early example of technological advancement and technological mediation through communication (Castells 2010, Harvey 1990). Although revolutionary, it was an inflexible piece of technology. The experience of sending short messages via telegraph was more akin to a monologue of beeps than the vocal conversations of current telephone culture. As communication technologies progressed, separate technologies were designed to address individual needs with each technology providing a different experience. The rotary telephone, for example, advanced communication with the ability to converse vocally over long distances while the radio undertook the activity of communicating to the masses but did not allow for the back-and-forth of conversation. Today, society has eschewed the fragmentation of many simple single use devices in favor of more technologically complex integrated platforms. This trend can be observed with the decline of the house phone, a once pervasive communicative technology that is being supplanted by multi-use platforms like smartphones which double as both a home phone and a cellular phone while also

functioning as a radio, word processor, television, alarm clock, or watch, amongst other things (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2010).

From telegraph to smartphone, the degree to which communication technologies mediate experiences has differed depending on the capabilities of the technology. The telegraph was language translated to electrical impulse which then had to be re-translated on the receiving end. Its communication was not only dependant on the technology needed to transfer the communiqué, but also on the specialized skill of those interpreting it. Even so, the telegraph lacked tone or original voice and in that context was little more than an expedited letter. Although simple, these translations and interpretations were acts of mediation. The removal of tone required that the receiver interpret and imagine the original intent of the message and apply this interpretation to the direction they believed the tone should take. And despite the advancement to e-mail, today's technology still engages with communication avenues that are similarly toneless or in other ways equally mediated by technology.

Text and e-mail, the most common forms of communication in WoW, are used to send, receive, interpret, and display messages. A user trusts technology to relay information the way it was intended and similarly trusts that the recipient will interpret the meaning of the toneless message accurately. However, that is not always the case. I have encountered many situations where a text or e-mail was perceived in a tone I neither intended nor expected, creating a misunderstanding where there was none. In these situations, the meaning of a digitally managed message was, in part, subject to the perception of the one receiving it. The message had been transmitted by technology and

interpreted by a human agent, yet the transference of meaning was altered in conversion from thought to text and back again, an alteration that would not and could not have occurred without technology's aid.

Even though text and e-mail are the most frequented communication technologies in game, there is also the ability to talk over voice chat, which sounds little different than a telephone. I remember one experience in particular when I was on the receiving end of a call and the caller said "I can't (static) you. (static) breaking up". Having had recent trouble in this particular romantic entanglement I assumed the static that I heard masked something along the lines of "stand" and "We're" and responded with my opinion about the breakup, when in actuality she had said "I can't hear you, you're breaking up". My first and particularly poignant encounter of technological mediation was its inability to keep a clear signal, which ultimately created a false perception of the meaning of the communication. In both text and vocal instances technology facilitated communication that, when combined with my own perception of the situation, shifted the nature of the intended meaning. In that way communication technologies both broadened the scope of available social experiences in games through the inclusion of text, e-mail, and voice mechanisms, while simultaneously imposing its mediation on those acts of communication.

The adoption of communication technologies by games has enabled them to become sites where social experiences can be created. However, regardless of how incorporated these communication technologies are into the game itself, whether or not a player engages with those elements, to what degree, and how ceases to be a question of

access to communication technologies themselves and becomes a question of agency on the part of the individual. Even if text and telephone mediate experience, if a person chooses not to engage in them then that person cannot be subject to their resulting mediation. Unavoidably, however, society has immersed itself in technologies to the point where complete avoidance of this mediation is unlikely. In the case of WoW, this optional and agency-driven utility of technology only further expands the potential for diverse experiences and perspectives to exist as players choose which technologies to interact with in the WoW and which to avoid despite all appearances of uniform technology usage in-game.

Social Networks

Broadly defined, a social network is a web of connections with varying degrees of meaning, established between people and closely entwined with and disseminators of culture. As cornerstones of society, social networks adapt to new technologies (Barnes 1954). Communication is undeniably a vital part of creating and maintaining a network of social relationships. Despite being exposed to new technologies, the mediation of social networks by digital technology did not occur until the 19th century, with the incorporation of the telegraph (Rantanen 1997; Harvey 1990; Tsatsou 2009). With its inclusion, social networks were able to extend and be maintained at longer distances than previously possible. Contemporary communication technologies not only allows for communication to travel distances near instantaneously, they allow a user to be perpetually integrated and networked with people, places and technologies such that

passing communication through physical distance or digital space is nearly effortless (Castells 2009, 2010).

For burgeoning sites of deep play like the virtual world of WoW, this means that the entirety of a person's social reality can be as connected or disjointed as they choose it to be with respect to an individual's financial means for obtaining the necessary technology to stay connected and the successful functioning of that technology to allow for connectivity. With the technologically-facilitated capability for social networks to connect between the virtual world and the physical world, the forces that mediate this network are the technologies necessary to maintain it and the agency of the individual such that a social network's maintenance is subject to the individuals' initiatives, interests, and desires (Castells 2010:XXVII).

Space and Time

Ushered in by advancements in communication and transportation, physical absence, geographic or temporal distances and boundaries are increasingly less important (Licoppe 2004; Castells 2010; Castells et. al. 2006). Additionally, technologies provide a mediated sense of time and space operating "in parallel or co-existence with external spatiality and temporalities" (Tsatsou 2009:18).

Contemporary theories describe the flexibility of time and space due to the influence of technology as "time-space compression" (Harvey 1990, 1993) or "time-space distanciation" (Giddens 1990, 1994). According to Harvey, technology's influence on perceptions of space and time is a sense of compression. He argues that integration of technology has led to "innovations dedicated to remove spatial barriers" citing the

airplane, telegraph, automobile, radio, telephone, aircraft, television and telecommunication revolution (1990:232; see also Castells 2010). This perspective emphasizes the perceived shrinking of distance. Harvey argues that because it takes less time to move the same amount of space, the significance of distance as value is lessened due to a decreased commitment of time. This "disruptive spatiality" redefines the spatial and temporal order of social life by both making social relations feel less distant, and contribute to the speed in which one can access their social relationships and social networks (1990:302).

Alternatively, Giddens uses the term "distanciation" to articulate a stretching of social structures. This perspective calls for a separation of time from space, where time becomes relative to the individual. From this perspective, Giddens maintains the physical and numerical value of distance, and contextualizes time as a value relative to an individual's physical location. For example, for two people having a conversation it could be 2:00 p.m. for one of them and at that exact moment, be 5pm for the other, effectively making time subjective to the locality of the one experiencing it.

That is not to say that time is not still reflective of cultural and geographic environments or that those environments are not important. Indeed, individuals still work, deadlines still matter, and time is still relevant for the "rhythm of social life which is at the basis of the category of time" (Durkheim 1965:488). Instead, this theory suggests that time, as subjective perception based in locality, now operates in parallel with other mediated times. In this way it promotes the possibility of subscribing to multiple simultaneous times and "time-space zones" (Ferguson 1989:156).

In the context of virtual worlds the transmuting of space and time contributes to its complexity. The virtual world creates a mediated space and universal time for that space. This contributes to WoW's projection and perception of mass uniformity. Not only are players subject to their local geographic time, they share a separate version of time in game with all other players. The masking of players' time and locality affects interpretation in two significant ways. First, by masking the players' natural times it removes the significance of local time's contribution to the rhythm of social life. There have been multiple times when I have been playing a game where either I or a teammate makes mistakes to the detriment of the group and apologizes by way of "sorry guys, it's 3:00 a.m. here and I'm falling asleep at my keyboard", or alternatively, leaves abruptly in the missile of a mission, usually causing irritation to the group members, and as justification says something along the lines of "sorry I have to go, didn't realize it was past 2:00 a.m. and I've got work/school in the morning". These instances affect both the experience of the user and the group, as well as their social relationships. For example, repeated incidents like that described above, regardless of its truthfulness, may cause others to not want to work cooperatively with that person anymore. Second, by masking locality, WoW masks the information about the cultural and situational contexts embedded in an indivduals locality, contexts which can inform on how a player interprets experience and expresses the intent of their needs interests and desires, and how they are perceived by others.

Placemaking

"Anthropologists have shown that place making in any spatial context is a complicated process always involving an entanglement of imagination, politics, and social relations" (Green et. al. 2005:805). The concept of place, according to Harvey, is "socially constructed, multi-layered and divergently contextualized" (1993:4). Place, then, cannot be understood without taking into consideration the context in which the act of place making occurs and individual's subscription to the place as a source of meaning. This significance is informed on by not only geographic location, but an individual's experience of the lived world (Relph 1976). Individual's use places to define themselves and a person and social being with a past and future, enabling community-based identities and attaching meaning to social networks. This development of the self, social identities and networks, and place-making is not a static process. It is in flux and these perceptions are constantly and continuously reimagined and rediscovered as new experiences impact the interpretation of future experiences. The fluidity of the process enables place to become the "means through which people make sense of the world in which they live and act" (Harvey 1993:4), becoming important sources of individual and communal identity (Relph 1976). In this arrangement, place is the degree of significance created by an individual's relationship with a space, one that "reveals the external bonds of his existence and at the same time the depths of his freedom and reality" (Heidegger 1958:19). In this sense, place takes on the role of a staging area in which individuals attach meaning and significance to the symbolic interpretation of experience. Depending on the agency of the individual, place can be an area where one can interpret, create, redefine, and examine their sense of self, and their individual and social identities.

According to Beck (2000), a sense of "place polygamy" allows an individual to subscribe meaning to more than one place through a transnational geographic and technologically-facilitated mobility. As a result, technologically inspired, enhanced, and influenced mobility enables places to become more diverse as they become more accessible, allowing individuals to ascribe to several places at once (Tsatsou 2009).

Some contemporary theorists challenge this sense of place in reference to the digital or electronic spaces with the idea of "placelessness" (Relph 1976) or "non-place" (Ague 1995), where a lack of authenticity through simulated or replicated landscapes leads to decreased significance of experience (Tsatsou 2009). Ague uses an airport as an example of this type of non-place, a traveler's space where place making is hindered by archetype uniformity. Ague suggests that desensitization of creativity and identity occurs through the subscription to a cultural or situational mass uniformity. This analysis assumes that the experience of the individual traveller is static, unchanging, the same, and therefore not subjective, and does not attribute value to the diversity of the subjective experience involved in place making (Moores 2007; Tsatsou 2009). Ague is notably concerned with the physicality of "place" and thus dismisses mediated physical representations of digital and virtual places as imaginary non-places, banal utopias, or clichés (Auge 1995:94).

However, the binary notions of space as purely-physical or purely-virtual become less relevant as advances in technology and its' integration "transcend physical boundaries virtually instantaneously, while serving to recreate aspects of liveness and immediacy of physical co-presence" (Moores 2007:4). Facilitated by technology, places

as significant spaces are no longer confined to only physical manifestations. As technology strives to recreate the likeness of persona and landscape in digital simulacra, it increasingly fosters the sense of the physically familiar such that willing individuals envision even digital spaces as places of significant experience.

With regards to WoW, the ability for digital places to host significant experiences is intrinsic to their existence as a site of deep play. As virtual worlds increasingly inspire the imagination of "place" by creating locations where activities that have meaning are constructed and where community and identity are negotiated they likewise increase in social complexity congruent with an increase in population diversity. As each person carries with them their own set of initiatives, interests, and desires, to include representation through a diverse set of rendering and connection technologies, their interactions with an increasingly diverse group fosters the potential for a greater breadth of social negotiations to occur (Shirky 2009). Ague's idea of *non-place* illustrates one area of weakness in current interpretations of WoW. WoW interpreted solely as a non-place of symbolic mass uniformity limits the scope of diverse social experiences had there, as its inhabitants only attach a limited amount of value to the digitally fabricated environment and limiting their own sense of presence. Similarly, WoW interpreted solely as a place (with all the accoutrements of meaning that placemaking carries) can globally misrepresent experiences, attachments and sense of presence as too deep for some. That is, to some participants, WoW could be perceived as a non-place, but others can create more of an attachment to it as a place. Not accounting for the variability in meaning causes academic inquiries to mistake more varied and diverse reality of spatial

22

subscription for a the projection of mass uniformity, erroneously ascribing a binary

determination that WoW is either a place or a non-place, when the reality is that the

determination can differ not only by individual but also that individuals' temporal utility.

Ague's sense of mass uniformity then is "more an organization of diversity than a

replication of uniformity" (Hannerz 1990:237) where diversity is masked (and

organized), and uniformity projected, by the opaque guiding mediation of architectural

logics and grammars of the blackbox.

By viewing WoW as a place capable, for those that wish it, of producing

significant experiences, then understanding an individual's degree of attachment to WoW

may inform their sense of symbolic, cultural, and social constructions that occur in the

virtual world, while shaping the methods of inquiry to account for the potential variance

in space and non-space bound constructions of meaning.

Presence/Self

From telegraph to place polygamy current technologies empower individuals to be

in "two places, two times, at once" (Scannell 1996:176). Despite its limitations,

technology infuses people's social reality with the ability to experience and represent

versions of the self in multiple environments and contexts. In this way an individual

would be able to participate in the physical reality of their location as well as be projected

simultaneously into one or more "social spaces of virtual reality" (Castells 2009:xxix).

For example an individual that has profiles on WoW, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter re-

presents versions of themselves in each of these spaces. This individual experiences a

social reality that stems from the social networks of all of these places, in addition to any

other physically created (even if technologically maintained) social networks. This experience, in terms of representation, interpretation, and projection, is considered presence.

From the perspective of the researcher, determining the influence of virtual social spaces, and the influence of their social networks, are difficult to ascertain. They are difficult to ascertain because they depend on understanding the agency of the individual and the available utility of the space, where the available utility is the capabilities of the platform (i.e., a photography website may by so specialized that it does not allow for the sharing of music or documents) and agency refers to what available features an individual chooses to engage with. The utility of technology is contextualized by comparing what participation in the space offers the individual and how that participation fulfils the individual's initiatives, interests, and desires.

The concept of presence is broad but recognized as integral to providing insight into the lived experience of the individual through the mediation of technology. Different modes of presence can be conceptualized through the dimensions of telepresence, copresence, and social presence. These modes articulate how and with what significance an individual interacts with others and the environment through mediating technology. Studies show that "people have reported feeling some level of presence in almost all mediated environments" (Nowak and Biocca 2003:481; see also Rheingold 2000, Schroeder 2002).

Telepresence facilitates the perception of the digitally rendered world as separate from where the physical body is located, incorporating a sense of actually being

24

somewhere else (Heeter 1992; Steuer 1994; Nowak and Biocca 2003). This mode of presence focuses on the perception of the environment and situational awareness. Alternatively, copresence is the perceived connection with another person in a way that emphasizes one individual perceiving another and the reciprocity of the other perceiving the individual. It is a state where individuals are "uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another" (Goffman 1963; Nowak and Biocca 2003; Nowak 2001). Additionally, social presence encapsulates a medium's facilitation of and effectiveness in providing communication between one individual and another and the perception that that facilitation is effective, or accurately representative of the individuals' intentions (Nowak 2001; Nowak and Biocca 2003).

The dimensions of presence are actively incorporated in the lived experience of the individual inside a social space of virtual reality such as WoW. Nowak and Biocca (2003) found that elements of telepresence, copresence, and social presence were experienced when individuals interacted with each other and with the environment of the virtual world. This discovery indicates that modes of presence are somewhat dependent on, and influenced by, technology. For example, an individual is less likely to experience the mediated presence of "being there" (Heeter 1992; Steuer 1994; Nowak and Biocca 2003: 481) when participating in a social but relatively unchanging platform like MySpace or Facebook. In contrast, WoW created an immersive and reactive visual and aural environment of constant movement. For example, when an character is walking through dry forest in a fall setting, the crunching of leaves and snapping of twigs could be heard underfoot.

In these places individuals experience, or more accurately, are perceived as having a constant and a semiautomatic social presence because the mediating technology in Facebook portrays other individuals as always present even if they are not technically "on line", or viewed differently when a person is not on line the profile remains and active projection and accessible to others. Conversely, an individual who has signed on to their account inside WoW, a place which necessitates active participation, is more likely to experience the mediated presence of *being there* in the actual environment because of the active visual and aural negotiation of the virtual world. In WoW player can view the environment and the active engagement of other players, an aspect that contributes to their sense of copresence (Schroeder 2002) depending on the imagination of the individual and the degree to which they allow themselves to be immersed into the environment. Interestingly, Nowak and Biocca (2003) show that that a feeling of copresence and telepresence can exist without the involvement of other individuals as virtual worlds force players to actively engage with program driven characters or Non-Player Characters (NPCs), its landscape, flora, and fauna. Because telepresence involves an individual's interaction with the environment (exposure which does not require involvement of others), and copresence in a simulated form when the individual interacts with NPCs that look, move, and interact in a way that mimics human interaction. The mode that most often requires another person to interact with is social presence, but increasingly, games have developed responsive algorithms for NPCs that, in a limited capacity, create the feeling of actual conversation. Depending on the technology available and a person's willingness (i.e., agency) to use that technology, different types of social

26

spaces of virtual reality provide exposure to different elements of presence, ranging from social presence to telepresence, and copresence. With these examples, one can see that some spaces allow, host, or simulate interactions in a way that other spaces do not. In the case of WoW, technologies have been incorporated so that it fosters a sense of all forms of presence to increase people's attachment to the space as a place.

Games

WoW as a virtual world and social space is a place saturated with a potential for meaning. However, not every person subscribes to that meaning to the same degree, and technology plays a role in people's ability to participate in experiences and through its various mechanical confines dictates how players are allowed to participate. In addition to technology's mediation, people's own perspectives, experiences, and cultural exposures shape how someone chooses to project and interpret meaning constructed within WoW. The technologies, and the variance and degree of experience they offer, coupled with individuals' own agency in selecting which technologies to utilize and shape their experience, fosters a depth in WoW should be considered a mediated site of deep play.

Research Questions

Utilizing the theoretical orientations of deep play and technological mediation to understand the role of symbolism and the construction of meaning in WoW, this study seeks to answer the following questions.

- Do individuals seek to use the same mediating technology for the same, similar, or different reasons?

- Does exposure to technology differently generate different experiences in the same social space of virtual reality?

- What role do the socially and mechanically constructed boundaries inherent in electronic platforms play in meaning, expression, and interpretation?

- Does technology impact an individual's ability to express and perceive others?

- And to what effect do these answers have on the lived experience of individuals inhabiting and interacting in the same space?

Organization of this thesis

This study attempts to trace the flow of technological mediation while offering an argument that virtual worlds constitute a source of deep play. In Chapter Two, I utilized my experience as an active member, expertise as a programmer, and training as a social scientist to provide a more detailed description of the mechanics important to forming significant experiences in WoW with a specific focus on technology. In this chapter I describe in depth the mechanics of WoW so to better situate the functioning of activities covered in subsequent methodologies and data collection chapters.

In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed outline of the methodologies employed in WoW and I attempt to create a study that explores the space horizontally and vertically. The exploration into methodologies ventures into both digital and physical spaces and trace motivations that may originate in either place and discerns the effects of these questions on the expression of intent and the interpretation of meaning in WoW.

In Chapter Four, I explore and interpret data collected across multiple sites in WoW. Utilizing thematic analysis I distil keywords from the data collected and separate

them into emergent themes. I then explore the meaning of these themes as they apply

globally to WoW as a virtual world and locally to isolate specific server-oriented

commonalities. In this, I seek to better understand the effects of technological mediation

on the construction of meaning in virtual spaces

Chapter Five offers conclusions and approaches to expanding the current state of

ethnographic inquiry. In it, I argue that current research methodologies should be

complemented by an expanded scope of research tactics in order to more effectively

explore the diverse nature of symbolic social negotiations in virtual worlds and situate

them as sites of deep play. By doing so, I use these examples to recognize and reveal the

effects of technological mediation on experience in virtual sites of deep play.

<center>**CHAPTER TWO**</center>

Mechanics of WoW

By navigating its landscape and engaging with elements both automated and player-driven, inhabitants of WoW had the opportunity to participate in a variety of experiences. Through a pursuit and fulfillment of their initiatives, interests, and desires, Player-Characters (PCs) in WoW perceived, expressed, and interpreted the meaning of these experiences differently. Even though the symbolic construction of what experiences meant to PCs could differ, the motivations and meaning produced by members of this community was often mistakenly perceived as homogeneous because they are all presented through a mechanically enforced appearance of mass uniformity. In addition to the perception of homogeneity, the technology of WoW further shaped PCs experience by imposing limitations on their ability to express intentions and interact with one another and as a result. This mediation therefore, was not a neutral transmission of intent and perception between PCs. Instead, it shaped the PCs' expression of intent and the interpretation of meaning either through the mechanical logics and grammars that directed how and in what way PCs can interact with each other and the environment, or through the technologies of interaction as PCs are projected through their computer interface, connection and into the environment of WoW.

However, before delving into the process and methods of exploration, and prior to

presenting the data gathered during this study, I felt it necessary to articulate some of the

mechanical ways WoW, as a host platform, enabled PCs to interact with eachother and

their environment. Additionally, providing an explanation of WoW's history,

environment, and basic mechanics at this stage allowed for greater fluidity in later

chapters. Doing this bypassed the need to stop mid-analysis and define the game

characteristics necessary to properly contextualize the elements mentioned in a given

situation to enable a greater depth of discussion.

 This chapter explores WoW as a host of prescribed experiences by revealing them as

specific mechanical constructions whose underpinnings mediate and shape the production

of experience and not meant as a comprehensive outline of WoW as a game.

History and Influences
WoW is a game developed by the company Blizzard Interactive. Released in the

United States in November of 2004, WoW is the fourth iteration of the popular Warcraft

franchise and at the time of this research saw a community of over six million people. By

2006, WoW had grown to be one of the most popular and populated games of its time

(Bainbridge 2010:4). It was modeled after EverQuest (EQ), a Massive Multiplayer

Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). An MMORPG is a type of game that combines

access to a variety of game elements augmented by capabilities afforded by the

involvement of large-scale populations of players. MMORPGs grant PCs the flexibility to

tailor their own experience, within certain mechanical limitations, through a relatively

effortless migration between elements of gameplay. To understand and differentiate

between the experiences, one must first understand the elements that framed their experience.

Elements of Gameplay

"World of Warcraft is usually called a game, but this word has multiple and ambiguous meanings" (Bainbridge 2010:5). Games today are more complex in that they are composites of many different, and what use to be separate, game elements. As such, establishing an effective and accurate typology has become increasingly difficult because game genres change as games are explored, refined, and reinvented (Crawford 1984). Therefore games should be evaluated on an individual basis, and be understood as belonging to several different genres and housing multiple elements simultaneously (Apperley 2006).

Elements in Games

Simply put, elements are core themes through which a PC engages with the environment and other people in WoW. Elements are comprised of broad, sometimes overlapping, characteristics representative of the type of experience that it. As an MMORPG, WoW focused heavily on the role-playing aspect of gaming. Role-playing games (RPG) are a type of game that place an emphasis on the act of assuming the role of a character and that characters interaction with the simulated world. The ways in which a character interacts with the world are through gameplay elements such as quests, exploration, and skill acquisition. The game then interacted with a person, through their character, as if that person was embodied in the character. The degree to which a person assumes their role is entirely up to them. These roles can be chosen by selecting a

combination of race, class, and group function. Choosing a role in WoW affords

characters opportunities that are not available to others of a different role. This presents

an important example of how gameplay shapes experience. By assuming a specific role, a

character is granted access to elements of the game exclusively reserved for participants

who choose that role. By offering specific experiences to some and not to others, WoW

engages differently with different roles, presenting the potential for difference of

experiences. One of these main roles central to WoW, and other games, was the

experience embodiment provided and the PC's sense of presence. Although WoW is

identified as an RPG that does not mean it only incorporates RPG elements.

However, not all games are categorized the same way. While WoW was

categorized as an RPG, other games trade WoW's central characteristic of role-playing

for an identification by combat system. In this instance *combat system* means the way in

perspective from which players engage (usually in conflict) with one another and their

surroundings. One game type that focuses on combat as a core element of the game

experience is first person shooters (FPS). FPSs have a player take on a first-person

perspective to navigate the world, often in a violent way. This perspective removes the

idea of the character as a separate entity in an attempt to place the player directly into the

environment. While some games specialize in only one perspective, WoW offered PCs

flexibility of point of view and allows for a character to have a first-person or third

person perspective in the world depending on their preference for that specific type of

experience. This gives player the opportunity to see their character interact with the

world, or imagine that they themselves are interacting with the virtual world through the

first person perspective. As games like WoW become more complex, they cease to be strictly of one type or another and are often found to incorporate many different elements. While they will often advertise one primary element, but in fact include aspects from many more to diversify the experiences the game provides.

Scale of Social Capabilities

As a MMORPG, WoW advertised as a massively-multiplayer aspect to its experience. MMO or massively multiplayer online was indicative of the scale of community-involvement built into the game. As an MMO, WoW advertised that the game has the capacity for large-scale PC involvement and also hinted that the degree of sociality which was integral to many experiences the game offers.

Even though WoW catered to social interaction, it allowed for other level of social action to occur. In addition to the massively multiplayer aspect of gameplay, WoW also allowed PCs to choose the scale of interaction. Even though WoW had the capability to massively multiplayer, a PC can also engage in non-massive multiplayer or solitary play. Each of these attributes can lend a different shape to the in-game experience. Single player is a game mode that allows for an individual to navigate the contents of the game alone, separate from the presence of others. While a player can engage in solitary play, a concept known as *soloing*, that player is never truly without the company of others. Soloing is a term used almost exclusively in large-scale populated games to indicate that a player had chosen to not participate in the larger scale social aspects of the game. A PC may decide to engage in soloing, but would have no choice whether or not other players negotiated the world around them. This is similarly true for multiplayer. Multiplayer is a

game mode with which an individual can interact with others in small groups and to a very limited degree. Where a multiplayer game is often capable of housing two to 16 players, an MMO is often capable of housing hundreds or thousands of players. Simultaneously, WoW could never truly be a single player or multiplayer game because a player can never have the solitude that a non-MMO style game provides. This means that any player participating in WoW acknowledges the potential for social interaction. However, the boundaries between the cooperative and individual gameplay experiences are not rigid. If PCs experienced a shift in their initiatives, interests, and desires with regard to their preference for a more of less social experience, WoW made it relatively easy for the player to move through various social modes of gameplay.

Forming Experience in WoW

Whether it is negotiating the social strata of the multiplayer ethos, navigating the landscape of virtual space or a combination of both, the variety of game elements available to players in WoW afford them the opportunity participate in many types of experiences. The illusion of uniformity and homogeneity was propagated by affording all PCs the opportunity to participate in most of the same game elements and environments. Even though the opportunity is presented, the degree to which someone elects to participate in a particular element may differ as could the reason why the chose to participate. For example when one PC might choose to engage with others to create social bonds, another PC participating in the same experience might see the social mechanics as a means to facilitate group cooperation and accomplish a goal; a means to an ends. More complexly, both PCs might share the same opinions (i.e., social

components makes the experience more enjoyable, as well as the quicker way to achieve a goal that by one's self, but the difference in experience lay in the prioritization of these interests. Where the former PC may be interested in finishing a quest, they would still see the experience as productive if in the meantime it fostered a friendship. Whereas for the latter PC, friendships were secondary to game progression and even if a friendship was created during the experience would not see the experience as worthwhile if the quest was not completed. So rather than conceptualizing WoW as a mechanism that shapes the entirety of an individuals' digital experience, WoW should be understood as the platform whose mediation contributes shape to the outcome of the PC's interpretation of the experience. The mechanical forces of WoW that shape the production of experience can be separated into game elements and game mechanics. The other aspect that forms an individual's experience is the subjective interpretation of events as rendered by the PC. This subjective aspect of the interpretation of the experience can be expressed as agency employed through utility.

Game Mechanics

Game mechanics are the logics and grammars that for the rules programmed into a space that govern gameplay. These rules are firmly set and globally applicable and they dictate the ways in which an individual is allowed to interact with objects in the world. Where game elements may create the occupation of Blacksmith as a theme to be experienced, game mechanics is the production of how the act of blacksmithing is represented graphically, the limited visual and aural effects, and the objects a PC can make via blacksmithing. Similarly if a PC attempts to communicate with another PC, the

game mechanics are the operations and algorithms needed to communicate (e.g., the use of chat channels, how the text appeared, the speed with which messages and mail were delivered). Game mechanics also included the technology an individual's uses to interface with their character internal to WoW's servers and not to include the computer interface or connection. They were the tools the player uses to make a character navigate the world, for example how high the character jumps when spacebar was pressed. Where gameplay is an active, fluctuating, experience of engagement, game mechanics are relatively static and universal to the host and require significant effort to change.

Game Elements

Game elements are created to give depth to the game and to allow for more than one experience when participating in the game itself. Thematic in nature, game elements afford players the opportunity to pick and choose from a variety of available experiences that resonate with their initiatives, interests, and desires. Through the incorporation of various elements, PCs create a tailored experience. Where elements are type of experiences are being offered, such as quests, role playing, player-versus-player combat, crafting, or raiding, game mechanics are how an individual would go about participating in those experiences and the mechanical rules PCs were required to follow. Where game elements provide the thematic context of the experience, game mechanics are unavoidable and used to navigate all experiences.

Gameplay

Gameplay can be expressed as the lived experience of a PC as they engaged with themselves, others, and the environment of WoW. As such, the experience of gameplay is

continuously being created and recreated as an individual participates in new experiences. However, the creation of experience cannot be attributed to a single influence or element. Constructed from *game mechanics* and *game elements*, the mechanical framework shepherding gameplay can be understood as the logics and grammars that dictate how players interact with objects in the space and the type of experiences the game encourages. Also influencing the experience of gameplay is the agency that motivates the player's pursuit of initiatives interests and desires. This utility can be understood in terms of what a player hopes to get out of the game, and the social and technological aspects of the game that a player chooses to engage with in order to achieve that end. Through both guided by the confines of the mechanical framework, *mechanical utility* and *social utility* represent an important distinction between the mechanical and scociocultural aspects of the game environment and emphasizing the degree individuals seek to engage with the social and mechanical elements of the space, in relation to their full capability.

Mechanical Utility

Closely married to game mechanics and game elements, *mechanical utility* is the incorporation of PC agency into the navigation of the games mechanical elements. While all PCs were forced to use the same tools of game mechanics to engage with the environment and population of WoW, players had the ability to choose for themselves which elements to use, how to use them, and how often. This interpenetration of agency and mechanics is important as agency is limited by the confines of the game mechanics, but that limitation encourages a broadening of the symbolic meaning of an action. For example, the game only supplies the ability to slap a player, usually an offensive gesture,

but it can be recontexualized with humor or consolation by a player to mean something different. In this example, the agency of a player not only dictates what meaning they were trying to project with the action of slap, but the utility of whether to engage in that action at all. The pursuit of such actions, and the degree to which a player utilizes gameplay mechanisms, is characterized by agency's pursuit of initiatives, interests, and desires. Some PCs choose to use all of the mechanical tools available and some do not, but the are an indication of how various different experiences are pursued in-game.

Social Utility

Linked to mechanical utility is *social utility*. This is separate from that of mechanical utility because it differentiates social engagement from mechanical utilization. While engagements with both are driven by PCs agency, mechanical utility emphasizes the relatively immobile tools of the WoW interface and social utility focuses on use of various social mechanisms built into a game to create or pursue different experiences. Where one player might engage with guilds, a decidedly socially enforced mechanism even if mechanically bounded, the social component can impact their experience (though even within guilds motivations can differ from primary focus on social grouping to bypassing barriers of accessibility to gain access to game content). Similarly if a player's initiatives, interests, or desires are angled toward the creation or maintenance of social networks, then the social experience is primary to achieving that end and a negotiation of the mechanical tools of WoW that enable players to be social were only barriers to surmount.

The multiplayer component of WoW is such a prominent factor in the experience of an MMO that the extent to which individuals choose to navigate social structures is important. Additionally, unlike mechanical utility which focuses specifically on the internal mechanisms that dictate how a player engages with the WoW's environment and others, social utility can be characterized by the internal and external social mechanisms that individuals choose to pursue related to the game but not limited within the confines of the Virtual World itself (e.g., voice over internet protocol software, communication about WoW via out of game text, email, and guild websites). So while it is similar to and intersects with mechanical utility, it differs by denoting a primacy of player interests toward social (rather than mechanical) elements, and the utility representing. For example, game mechanics is the programming that allows players to form a group; mechanical utility is whether or not players decide to participate in that group; social utility is the degree to which players engage with the social element of the formed group; and gameplay is the experience an individual derives from the interaction as a whole.

The term utility in both of these concepts emphasizes the activity of human agency within the game in choosing which, of the available social and technological avenues of experiences, they use to pursue their various initiatives, interests, and desires. Where mechanical utility is the individual's active engagement within the space in relation to all possible avenues of engagement, and social utility is the choice of social engagements amongst all possible available opportunities for sociality to be expressed within the place. By revealing and understanding these components as separate but often interdependent intersecting elements, can help investigate whether or not people engage

with technology, and its utility as much as its discrete pieces, differently and to the pursuit of what end.

In the negotiation of an individual's in-game experience, WoW provides the platform from which the initiatives, interests, and desires of players take shape. It supplies the mechanical framework that creates the potential for experiences to occur and game elements and game mechanics guide the experience of gameplay. However, without the presence of people, WoW is space without the meaning of place. Similarly, the individual is dependent upon the space as a staging area from which to pursue those experiences. Therefore, whether by choice or rule, technology of the interface, connection, and platform mediates the individual's act of experiencing.

Fostering an In-Game Experience

In previous sections I covered the availability of different experiences, technology's role as a mediator, and what can shape the active role of experiencing. Many of these have been generic and vague examples, loosely specific to WoW. This was done in order to situate the knowledge of these spaces in terms that are common across MMOs and other games. This section provides examples and details specific to WoW and serves introduce WoW as a place and social space of virtual reality, where its millions of members choose to participate in experiences. To create these experiences, and indeed to participate in WoW at all, every PC must interact with a few specific elements.

Servers

WoW had such a large population that attempting to host all of them on one server was not possible. The gamespace was not built to handle that much data. Instead, WoW dispersed the population into separate, nearly identical servers known as *shards* (Bainbridge 2010:6). A shard was a replica of WoW, such that its NPCs and landscape were exactly the same for every server. To cater to preference, language and optimal connection speed, servers were organized by location, time zone and type. Some servers were specific to North America; others are specific to South America, Europe, China and South Korea. This can be an important choice because the language NPCs used reflected the official language of the country to which it is assigned. Within each of these regions is a list containing realm names, realm types, number of characters, and population. In North America, servers are further divided by time zone. There are servers available for Eastern, Mountain, Central, and Pacific Standard Time. These time zone servers were then subdivided by four server type variants which informed on a player's chosen method of interaction with the world and with others. These types are Player Versus Player (PVP), Player Versus Environment (PVE), Role-Playing (RP), and Role-Playing Player Versus Player (RPPVE). The standard variant of engagement is PVE, where player engages primarily against the environment and to a comparatively limited degree against other players. In PVP realms, in addition to the standard engagements with the environment, players have minimal restrictions on combatively engaging with each other. Similar to the first two types, RP also encourage players to engage with the environment, while adding a heavy focus on role-playing. In addition to the first three, there is also a RPPVP which incorporates both a focus on role-playing aspect and the player versus

player aspect, but population of these realms is minimal. During character creation, an individual chooses a server type. Selecting a server cannot be changed for that character as it provides the platform and basic rules of engaging with the world. This is one of the first ways game mechanics shape the PC's experience. It is also a way for a PC to customize the tone of their experience. PVP servers are generally more player combative, whereas in PVE and RP server types player versus player combat can only happen in designated places. In RP servers, it is likely that a character will encounter others who attempt to take on the role of their character and imagine how that character would behave, speak, and interact with others. Interestingly, PVP servers institute a revised game mechanic extending the scope of PVP, whereas embodiment in RP servers was much more socially enforced than through any enforcement by a game mechanic.

Each of these realms has a time zone by which WoW orients the player base of that realm with a sense of locality. This was done with the knowledge that there are peak activity periods where the most people are playing WoW, and attaching a time zone for a specific realm causes people whose locality is that time zone, to exist in game at the same time as others live locally and are active in the same time-relative hours. However, there was no restriction on being in a server with a different time zone than the player's resident locality. A player whose play period was between 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time might be out of sync with most of the population that began playing at 6:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. This could influence their experience of gameplay if their interest lies in group cooperative activities, and they log into a server where most of the cooperative activities occur at other times.

Additionally, a statistic is attached to all servers. These categories represent population density where least occupied to most occupied is articulated through five levels: New Players, Low, Medium, High, and Full. In a server with a full population, an individual would experience wait times in order to log in, whereas a server with a low population an individual would not experience a delay in logging in to the WoW universe. This was intended to encourage even PC diffusion of player among servers of the same type.

Mechanisms for Experience

In game, experience is a digitally-tangible accumulation of points that was meant to quantify the act of having an experience. The basic structure of experience accumulation was set up to mimic a real life perception of experiencing something, to give players a sense of progress, age, and to mark achievement. For nearly every completion of a task (commonly called Quests), discovery, achievement, or slaying of a monster, a character gains experience points (xp). When enough experience has been gained, the character goes up a level. At this point, a new level might make available new and harder quests, grant access to more difficult area, or allow the character to create, and use better equipment. In WoW, there are multiple kinds of experience. The types are, adventuring experience, trade skill/profession experience, and reputation experience, and the acquisition of each operates relatively independently of one another.

Adventuring experience is the primary form of experience. It was gained by completing quests and tasks, discovering new places, and slaying monsters. It was the primary form of experience because it is one of the few types that can limit a players'

access to certain areas of the Azerothian landscape. That is, if the PC was not a high

enough level they are denied access to certain level specific areas of the game. A

secondary part of adventuring experience was proficiency experience specifically related

to combat. Proficiency experience was how good a character is at using a particular

weapon or skill. The better a PC was at using a weapon or skill, the more effective that

action is (e.g., block, dodge, parry). A high skill level will result in a greater chance for

that skill to be successful, whereas a low skill level will often guarantee an attempt to fail.

The more a character uses a skill, the better it becomes. This process is intended to

simulate learning. Adventuring experience to some degree was impossible to avoid, as its

element was central to many game experiences.

Profession was another experience type, but unlike adventuring, the mechanism

for gaining profession experience was context specific. Where adventuring experience

was gained regardless of character class, profession experience can only be obtained

when doing an action specific to that profession. That is to say, unlike adventuring

experience, profession experience does not happen organically. A PC had to choose to go

out of their way to pursue it, the exertion of effort reflected a desire for that particular

experience. For example, if the character does not have the mining skill trained, then

game mechanics prevent a PC from even attempting to mine ore. While mining increased

levels for that profession, the creation of items was needed to gain experience in the

production professions (most PCs call it crafting, while Blizzard's official name for it is

production). Crafting professions required a PC to produce an item, usually by combining

or refining one or more other items. Crafting professions were used for personal and

public use and the result of which was often put into the player-driven economic system. Unlike combat skill levels, profession levels are not contingent upon adventuring level. Indeed there are characters that choose to exclusively craft or a player that has multiple characters and only some craft, some adventure, and some participate in both.

Professions can be the main source of, or supplement a PC's experience as it was understood through a particular character. Where some PCs used professions as a way of creating items for themselves and their friends, others used it as a source of income by selling the equipment they produce in the *Auction House*, the mechanical staging ground for the player-driven economy to buy and sell objects. Still others did not engage in professions at all. This meant that some people experienced professions and some did, adding to the sense that PC's chose to participate in many different experiences for many different reasons.

The third kind of experience was reputation experience (commonly called *rep*). There are many different communities, organizations, governments, and business in WoW that, once encountered, simulated social relationships with that group of people in the form of a quantified scale called *reputation.* There were eight levels of reputation, the higher the reputation the better the NPC responds and the lower the reputation the more likely they were to attack a PC. Reputation with a group ranged from the highest (*exalted*) where a PC was granted access to any items or quests that group has to offer, to the lowest (*hated*) where the PC was kill on sight (KoS) and was attacked by anyone of that group whenever a PC came with a specific proximity. In general, the better the reputation a PC had with a group, the more items or quests that PC had access to.

Additionally, the better a PC's reputation was, the more difficult it was to improve; to reach the highest levels of reputation took a significant time investment on the part of the PC. This exhibits another type of participation that needs to be willingly pursued to be obtained.

Activities

Through the mechanism of experience, WoW uses a variety of activities to promote and expand the types of experience it offered. These activities usually fell under the main element of Quests, but were comprised of many different and varied smaller elements.

Quests

As a prominent game element Quests were available irrespective of server type, playstyle, or avenue of experience a player prefers. It was one of the defining factors that makes WoW relate itself to that of an RPG. Quests are tasks given by an NPC, who then offered rewards for its completion. These rewards came in the form of items, money, materials, reputation points, class skill, or were used as a stepping stone that unlocked a more difficult quest. Quests participation came in two forms, solo and group. Most solo quests were to be completed alone or in a group, but they were usually such low difficulty that a PC was able to complete them when soloing. In this instance a PC chose to add a social element to the solo experience of gameplay to change or add to the event experienced depending on their initiatives, interests, and desires to engage the social component of WoW.

There were a many types of group quests. These quests stand apart by difficulty and were often denoted by highlighting the number of PCs the designers of the game

believed it needed to succeed at the quest. In this way group quests were designed to be

too difficult to complete alone, thereby forcing PCs into cooperative engagements with

others that required a degree of sociality. Group quests were also available in party or

raid form. However, game mechanics dictated that raid quests can be completed in a part

(five or fewer members), but party quests could not be completed in a raid (six or more

members). This was because a raid would make the completion of a party quest too easy,

eliminating the need for a small group experience and the sense of achievement that

accompanied the success of a quest.

Player versus Player

Even if an individual did not select a PVP server, there were still options for player

versus player combat built into the game. This mechanic came in three main forms;

battlegrounds (BGs), arenas, and open-world PvP. Player versus player was a broad

activity that focuses on teamwork, competition, achievement, and performance. Players

were often rated or ranked on their degree of mastery. While the ranking has social

influence, the rating itself was controlled by the game.

BGs were direct player versus player combat themed scenarios. Arenas, like BGs,

exist in a secure space or instance. Instead of themed scenario, arenas were reminiscent of

a gladiatorial area where success was measured in the complete elimination of the other

team. Unlike the other two varieties of PVP, open-world PVP exists as part of the

landscape of the world, not a separate space. Open-world PVP (often just referred to as

PVP), was the engagement of players against other player while in the normally

accessible landscape of Azeroth.

Quests and PVP scenarios were WoW's main avenues for combining and creating

a variety of experiences. Such gameplay was married to an equally diverse combination

of landscapes and cinematic effects intended to enrich immersion and motivate the

pursuit of whatever goal that mode of experience required.

Race

In WoW, all participation was contingent upon digital representation. However,

the role of digital representation was more than just acting as the avenue for experiencing

moments. It was the mechanism from which a person presented themselves to others

inside the space, and in turn perceived and was perceived by those others. The

opportunity for this to occur would not exist if a character was not created to participate

in the world. When first creating such a character, an individual must choose both a race

and a class. WoW allowed a perspective player to choose between 13 playable races, and

11 playable classes. After which the a perspective player had the option to tailor the

physical characteristics and physique of the character to suit their own initiatives,

interests, and desires, or opt for a random generation of those traits.

Races in WoW were divided between two factions: Horde and Alliance, with one

exception. Six races were playable for each faction, and the seventh race was Pandarean,

and available to both. Each race had its own unique characteristics, history, attributes,

and base avatar model that could cause an individual to prefer it over the other races.

While the customization options for the physique and characteristics were similar in

category (e.g., facial hair) between each race, they differed in aesthetic appearance (e.g.,

dwarves have a history of long beards, therefore the options for a dwarfs facial hair

selection were of a different length and style than that of the undead). Blizzard provided a large, but not unlimited, number of ways in which a person represented them through the character. Choosing a specific race also enabled a player to participate in certain gameplay elements or professions that may not have be available to other races. For instance, Pandareans begin the game in a temple, situated hit atop a mountain bluff. It was unlikely that other characters will be able to access that area for an extended period of time, owing to the fact that traversing the landscape at a low level can be hazardous to the health of a new character (i.e., can be easily attacked and slain). Therefore if an individual has a particular affinity for, or wishes to participate in, a monastic and East Asian themed experience, they might be inclined to choose this race over any other. Each race offered an individually similar, though not similarly-themed, unique character beginning.

Class

In conjunction with race, class further contributes to the experience of a character. However, unlike race where the starting location may be unique, class-specific opportunities for unique experience in the form of quests were available throughout all levels of the game. Classes then, were themes or perspective a character took specifically related to development and ability. A class was selected during the process of character creation and once selected, can never be changed. A class often indicated the type of play style a character pursued and affected their choice of group roles later on

Eleven classes were available: Warrior, Paladin, Hunter, Rogue, Priest, Shaman, Mage, Warlock, Monk, Druid, Death Knight. Each of these classes filled a different role

within the group play and had different actions, abilities, and powers. Every class had three talent trees available to them. These trees were a way of tailoring a character to according to the player's preferences and desired group role. While all characters of a class had the same basic repertoire of spells and abilities, the games way to personalize the generic class platforms were to give individuals customizable options via the talent tree. Talent trees were different for every class. Additionally, not every class was available for every race. There were many class/race combinations that could not be chosen because the story behind the class in some way fundamentally contradicts or opposes that of a particular race. This circles back to the thematic focus on roleplaying. For instance, the undead race cannot be a druid. The undead are resurrections of a once living thing, themed in such a way that their very existence goes against the natural order of life and whose unnatural state defiles nature. Juxtaposed to that was the druid, a class whose theme specifically upholds the value of life, and opposed those who would despoil nature and disrupt the natural order of life. These two aspects of a character cater to themes that were diametrically if not violently opposed to one another. Because of that, game mechanics did not allow for the selection of undead as a race and druid as a class. For a complete list of race and class options see Table 1 below.

Table 1 Race and Class Options

Faction:	Alliance						Both	Horde					
Race:	Draenei	Dwarf	Gnome	Human	Night Elf	Worgen	Pandarean	Blood Elf	Goblin	Orc	Tauren	Troll	Undead
Class:													
Death Knight	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Druid					x	x					x	x	
Hunter	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Mage	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Monk	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	
Paladin	x	x		x				x			x		
Priest	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Rogue		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Shaman	x	x					x		x	x	x	x	
Warlock		x	x	x		x		x	x	x		x	x
Warrior	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Roles

Working in tandem with talent trees and races were group roles. Roles were understood as a characters responsibility when in a group of its peers (i.e., of same or similar level). Often in smaller groups (a term used interchangeably with *party*) of three to five members, roles were divided into of Healer, Tank, Damage Dealer, and Crowd Control (CC). The Healer was responsible for keeping the party in good health as they enter into, during, and after combat. The Tank's role was to distract the enemy and cajole it into attacking the tank rather than another party member. Damage Dealers, on the other hand, rate themselves by the amount of damage they can produce consistently, otherwise known as damage per second (DPS). Finally, CC took on a number of heavy, medium, or light, or cloth armor-wearing forms. The responsibility of the CC was to manage the number of opponents that can attack the group simultaneously. In addition to one these group roles, the party leader was generally responsible for the overall actions and managing of the party members while managing the aspect of the specific combat role. In

small group game mechanics essentially dictated which roles are needed. These roles were identified and define by the game.

In larger groups, such as raid groups, roles were essentially the same expanded through a combination of necessity and social convention to fit the needs of the larger group. Such roles were not defined by game mechanics and were instead imagined and employed by consensual group members. Where a party has a group leader, the raid has a raid leader. Raid groups are often the combination (in size if not composition) of two or more groups. Where the ideal composition of a group was one healer, one tank, one CC and two DPS, a raid group might have three tanks, three healers, one CC and three DPS. A raids composition was much more variable and was decided on by the members of the raid itself (often through trial and error). The composition depended on a few factors: needs of the task that characters are attempting to accomplish, availability of players online, and preferred composition as decided by the raid leadership. Sometimes the ideal was not the reality and while a group would prefer a third or even second healer, there may not be one available Also common in large groups was the addition of an Off Tank (OT) whose job was to act as a secondary and sometimes backup tank should the situation become untenable.

Races and classes share the shaping of thematic elements and gameplay perspectives. They added themes to playstyles and added depth to the experience by situating a playstyle in a specific perspective. Where one person came to WoW to engage more with the role playing aspect, a different player might be less invested in imagining him/herself in that role and play for a different reason. As race constrained what class

was selected, so class constrained what roles can be taken in group. These factors shape the experiences, particularly of combat, in game. As individual factors, these components of a character influenced the experience of the individual. An experience which was largely driven by what the individual wanted to draw from participation in the space. If a character was conceptualized as a confluence of all three of these elements, and each has the ability to influence the experience an individual had, then it stands to reason that WoW provided a variety of experiences to be explored.

Through both optional and mandatory game elements, WoW provided PC's with the opportunity to have different experiences. It was the individual's choice whether to participate or not. Everyone was given similar opportunities to participate in game elements and some choose participate and others abstain from participating, then there was likely a reason. A player may choose to not participate because of their initiatives, interests, and desires. That is to say, they seek a different experience from the game. Other reasons can be of situational, temporal, or of unpredictable external origin such as a knock on the door, trying to make an 8:00 p.m. movie, or a power outage. Even with a host of possible reasons, the perceived effect of not participating, if not articulated, is subject to the imagined interpretation of those engaging with the non-participant.

This presents a complex problem for anyone conducting research in virtual worlds like WoW. If an ethnographer only documents the in-game experiences and behaviors (i.e., digital manifestation of those choices) of a set of individuals, then all the ethnographer observes is a deceptively simplified representation of complex motivations. Each member that participates in and contributes to the same experience could be

thinking, feeling, and wanting different things from a similarly-presented experience. An ethnographer needs to explore the intention and perceived interpretation of events by PCs across a variety of game elements, in addition to the documentation of events. If they do not, then the ethnographer may generalize or oversimplify the complex human element motivations powering actions in the digital environment. This kind of thin analysis is useful when attempting to identify the breadth of presentation available in game, but lacks the substance to derive viable theories on global thematic motivations. A deeper level of analysis is necessary to account for the diversity inherent in the environment. While it is the responsibility of the researcher to accurately represent the motivations and interpretations of a large group of people, it is difficult to implement. To provide an in-depth analysis of a particular event, an ethnographer would need to document not only the intentions and reasons of a PC as they are acting, but also how that action was perceived in game by documenting what others observed digitally, the meaning they derived from the action. Pursuing this process multiple times in multiple situations would reveal trends in how participants of WoW expresses themselves and interprets the actions of others and the factors that affect these perceptions. This process in conjunction with an investigation into the initiatives, interests, and desires of individuals, can reveal how PCs perceive their digital selves and others, informing on the digital representations of the self and subscription to identities.

Social Mechanisms

WoW provides a number of mechanisms that can help an individual create, maintain, reinforce, and sever social bonds. WoW encourages the navigation of social

bonds by incorporating the need for them into specific types of in-game experiences. As

players forge more relationships, those relationships become reason for players to

continue their subscription to WoW.

Avenues for Communication

Public and private chat channels are the main tools for communication in WoW.

Public channels are immobile fixtures determined by location. Private channels are

created by players and usually are not restricted by locality. Player created public

channels are organized by theme and private for a select PC or group of PCs. Even

though the channels are hosted in the space of WoW, topics in these spaces see an

intersection of both in-game and out of game content. Where class discussion chat

channels for each class are created to compare and enhance game mastery other channels

topics could include discussion on game mechanic policies, in-game and global politics,

current events, and other games. Some channels are also created to reinforce existing

social bonds even when players are members of different guilds with separate in-game

goals. Even though these members may choose to pursue different experiences, they still

choose to retain a group identity separate from the collective identities generated through

a subscription to a guild. Communication plays a large role in the creation and

maintenance of groups in addition to being the main avenue for expression.

Groups

The formation of groups is an important construction in WoW. Groups in WoW

have a flexible temporality that makes them either transient or semi-permanent fixtures.

Game mechanics encourage the formation and maintenance of group types, but the

motivation of the groups themselves, or their identity and goals however temporary, are entirely player driven. Often formed to address an in-game element, groups the nature of groups can shift dependant on the needs of its members. As such WoW provides the social mechanisms to communicate and interact in groups as well as the player's ability to turn temporary in to semi-permanent institution and dissolve those institutions as their initiatives, interests and desires see fit.

The more transient groups occur in the form of *parti*es, as in "a party of adventurers". Created for adventuring, this type of group consists of between two and five members, where five is the maximum amount allowed by the games mechanics. In its most transient form, a group of individuals that band together to achieve a set of mutual objectives before dispersing. These formations can be smaller groups of larger social formations such as guilds, or they can be a collection of random individuals drawn together by mutual interest. WoW provides a group finding tool that facilitates the formation of a group through a game elements and quest based-search mechanism. There are only two conditions to joining such a group and both are dictated by game mechanics, as is the formal grouping of the individuals. In order to join a group, a PC cannot already be grouped with another PC and they must be of the requisite level.

A larger version of an adventuring party is known as a *raid*. A raid is a group of anywhere between six and 40 members, that is, one more than the maximum allowed for a party. Up to eight parties can cooperatively participate in a large raid. While still raids, groups of ten and under are usually defined by their number (e.g., seven-man, eight-man, ten-man raid.) These group types are almost exclusively used for adventuring, rather than

any other kind of experience. This is because no game elements are created for parties or raids of crafters. Therefore, there is no reason for so many of them to band together in this form.

Guilds

Guilds are perhaps the most permanent social structures in WoW. They are a different type of group. Where the adventuring groups, like raids or parties, are temporary and mostly utilized for adventuring, guilds are entirely social. They are formed over a shared desire to experience the game's content in a similar fashion and are rarely as element-specific as the adventuring groups. A testament to their semi-permanent nature, guilds have formal names, titles, and crests. Similar to the exclusivity of an adventuring group, an individual can only belong to one guild at a time. Because they are of different types, a PC can be in an adventuring group and in a guild simultaneously. In fact, a common composition of adventuring groups is of a singular guild. Depending on the shared outlook on game experience, some guilds can be very competitive both with internally, and with members of other guilds. The most common form of this is a progression raiding guild. The ethos of these guilds centers on a sustained commitment to end-game content progression and mastery. While these are some of the most well-known types, there are many other ways ideas which guilds organize around. Family oriented guilds are groups where parents and children participate together; these guilds often have socially constructed and socially enforced language and topic rules. There are leveling guilds, where the members focus on the experience of exploring game content while leveling a character – a different type of progression. In a similar vein there are

crafting/production themed guilds, adults-only guilds, teen guilds, role-playing guilds and

many more. The guild types are not set up formally, but have emerged as social

constructions of share desire to experience the game in a specific way. These formations

expose three important concepts. Socially-formed institutions are a pervasive way PCs

experience the game and as such are subject to the values set for by those institutions.

The existence of many different types of guilds attests to the existence multiple avenues

for exploring initiatives, interests and desires. The non-universal subscription to guilds

alludes to the idea that while some PCs value the social element of a formal group as part

of their game experience, others do not, further attesting to the existence of different

initiatives, interests and desires among the entirety of WoW's population.

Player Dependency

Groups, chat channels, and other game mechanics encourage the construction of

social bonds in a variety of ways. However, these social bonds are necessary to the

game's survival. One of the reasons that individuals elect to stay and play the game after

a character has reached the maximum level is because of a feature known as *end-game*

content. End-game content refers to game elements that only become available after a

player has reached the "end" of the leveling aspect (i.e., progression) of the game. This

content is made to encourage that people stay and continue to invest time and money into

the space. Mechanically, WoW encouraged this through the incorporation of game

elements, often centered on adventuring, that only become available after max level,

although others may turn to different elements such as crafting or reputation to occupy

their time. Otherwise, players often lost interest when there was nothing else to achieve

or experience in the game. To combat this much of the end-game content, or near max level content, requires a raid or at very least a group, in order for it to be accessible thereby forcing players that want to experience it into social situations with one another. Blizzard uses the game mechanic of grouping to be the condition in which people can access game elements, and in doing so forces the creation of social bonds, which ideally will cause some people to stay and play the game when they would otherwise lose interest.

WoW needs players in order to function. In response, WoW encourages the construction of social bonds by integrating the need for them through various game elements. Doing so PCs begin to use WoW not only as a place that produces a uniquely Azerothian-themed set of experiences, but as a platform for sharing in social experiences and the fostering of social networks. For some a meaningful experience happens when engaging with the environment, for others it happens because of the social aspect, and for others it is a combination of both. However, by encouraging this, developers mold WoW to be a platform that creates these experiences and without which the relationships and experiences of meaning would be difficult to create outside of WoW. Thus, in order to continue those experiences, one must continue to subscribe to WoW. In the same way as if someone wishes to continue to talk with another person on their telephone's contact list, then need to keep a telephone active, by paying its subscription cost (i.e., phone bill). Through this WoW encourages and almost necessitates social experiences and then preys on those experiences to propagate its own existence

Contemporary researchers provide valuable insight through case studies on WoW and other similar places. However, they neglect to take into account technology's role in shaping the experience of the individual. Nardi states that WoW is accessible because the "entry point [is] a cheap commodity – a networked personal computer" (2010: 54) and addresses it no further; Boellstorff touches on it as an anecdote in his notes section on "client-side lag" (2010:262), (i.e., connection slowness); Pearce references it as "the technical constrain of platforms, and the limited availability of networks were all contributing factors" (2009:8) which sounds promising until it is situated exclusively in a past historical context of previous ethnographic studies and was not regarding present day technology. Finally the effect, if not the repercussions, is addressed from the viewpoint of the researcher in guidebook on method which states; "We should also think about how, if our computer is significantly worse (or better) than the norm among our informants, we will in some sense potentially be out of step with them experientially" (Boellstorff et al. 2012:72-73). Though even this piece is not reflexive in a way that considers how this may affect the respondents' experience, only the researcher's ability to perceive experience of the respondent.

While both owning a personal computer and the ability to be networked may be an easily-obtainable commodity for Nardi, this position does not take into consideration the effect that access to and experience with technology might have on the perceived uniformity of digital experience. Also it does not account for the diversity of initiatives, interests and desires among its population. As WoW neither provides the personal computer nor the conduit of a network connection used to connect the computer to WoW,

they have to be obtained through the different financial means of each respondent. Therefore, it is possible that the ability for an individual to project themselves, associate with others, form digitally-based selves and identities is subject to influence through their ability to access the technology, the financial means to obtain the technology, and how much of the technology an individual elects to interact with.

Additionally, this presents an interesting perspective on typical analysis of spaces like WoW to be skinner box-like instant gratification mechanisms. If WoW is merely a confluence of small gratifications, why are social bonds such prominent fixtures? And why would someone who has lost interest in the gratification of small senses of accomplishment, achievement, or even addiction, continue to stay in the space due to the significance of social bonds?

CHAPTER THREE

The concepts presented in the previous chapters laid the foundation from which I approached the ethnographic collection of data. I used my knowledge and experiences in virtual worlds to adapt the ethnographic and analytical processes and reflect the depth necessary to accurately represent the diverse nature of the environment. This process explored the diversity of expression and interpretation of WoW.

This was achieved by situating research inside a virtual landscape while remaining cognizant of the internal and external technological processes by which people access that landscape. By doing this, I was able to expand the vertical approach to data collection and analyses to incorporate not only the technology of WoW as a host space and virtual environment, but also to include and explore the mediation of computer and connection as well. The data was couched within a symbolic interpretative approach to analysis which served as the theoretical underpinnings of the study. This approach subscribes to the idea that an individual's interpretation of experience is contextualized by their exposure to a shared cultural system of meaning among members of the same society (Des Chene 1996). This system of meaning is shaped through agreed upon mores, symbols, and rituals. As a site of deep play with technological capabilities which have reduced the significance of physical locality and proximity, WoW was a virtual host to the many different intersecting cultural systems intrinsic to the worldview of locationally-

disparate players. Included at this intersection of cultural systems were the logics and grammars of WoW that unified the distinct interface-connection pairings and directed experience through game mechanics.

This architecture of this chapter begins with a description of WoW to situate its environment in a place and social space of virtual reality, as well as an information-rich location for ethnographic research. Next, I explored the methods and process of data collection and analysis employed during my period of research. Finally, I positioned my own experience and familiarity with this type of place as both a researcher and a pre-research participant, and its impact on the process of data collection and analysis.

Research Setting

Ethnographic data was collected throughout WoW's environment and was not limited to any single virtual geographic location. Its scope spanned content from the original World of Azeroth and the new content associated with the expansion packs Wrath of the Lich King, Cataclysm, and Mists of Pandaria. The process of data collection was timed to coincide with the release of a large content expansion, *Mists of Pandaria*. The reasons for this were twofold: The first was so that my period of data collection would incorporate both pre- and post-expansion content. The second is so that I would have this data to compare against the experience of Bonnie Nardi, whose research also coincided with an expansion.

Environment

The architectural landscape of WoW was wrought with medieval overtones and its natural landscape created to digitally simulate Earth. Trees, rocks, rivers, mountains

and oceans were graphically modeled after their corresponding physical objects. The

digital reproduction was accompanied by similarly reflective sounds that mimicked the

natural physical environment. In this way, Blizzard sought to create an immersive that

encouraged a PC's sense of *presence.* One enhanced by playing off a PC's existing

familiarity with the visual and aural landscape of objects in their physical world.

Azeroth's unnatural surroundings exist in the form of mechanical inventions, outposts,

towns, and cities. The natural and unnatural features of Azeroth are designed to remind

individuals of their physical reality while still employing cartoonish graphics to

encourage a PC's imagination as too real graphics have been found to discourage the

sense of presence (Nowak and Biocca 2003).

Accessing World of Warcraft

Anyone wishing to participate in WoW must follow an initial process of obtaining

the game, creating an account, selecting a server, and creating a character prior to

entering the virtual world. This process represented the initial mediation of the computer

and connection.

Pre-Character Creation

WoW was available for purchase at a retail outlet such as Bestbuy or

Amazon.com, or directly available from Blizzard as a digital download. I used a digital

download option to install WoW on my computer. After a few hours of downloading and

installation, I initiated a required updating process called *patching*. During this time the

patcher checked my computer to see if all the information on the computer was up to

date. If the installed copy differs from the master copy in any way the patcher rectifies

the situation by downloading and merging any additional files. It is set up this way to ensure that everyone participating in WoW is running off of the exact same version of the game and the primary way the game organizes and projects uniformity. The patching process was performed every time I logged into WoW. World of Warcraft has a regularly scheduled patch update every Tuesday morning from about 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, though these times are subject to change and are dependent upon the wishes of the company. During that time public access to WoW is suspended.

Once updated, the next step was to create a Battle.net account. As I already possessed a Battle.net account I did not need to revisit this process. Battle.net (located at http://us.battle.net/en/) is the interface through which players create and access their account out of the virtual world. The process was simple and required that I create a username and password. The account name is only visible to the person creating the account unless that person chooses otherwise. I did not make mine publically available so any forum posts had my character's name attached to it rather than my account name.

The next step was to validate my account and purchase any additional game time. During the time of data collection, WoW was a subscription based MMORPG, meaning that it had a monthly fee associated with playing. This monthly fee was waived for the first month of purchasing the game. After that if I wanted to continue to play I had the option to pay for a one, three, or six month subscription. In special cases a one year subscription was available. The cost of the monthly subscription varied depending on the length of the contract but started at $15.00 a month. The monthly cost was lessened if a longer subscription period was chosen is (e.g., one month of access is $14.99, and three

months of access is $41.87 payable in one installment, effectively making the month payment $13.99 a month). Payment options through credit or debit card or a pre-purchased game time card of equivalent value. While patching was a recurring condition of logging into the game, I was only required to go through the account creation and payment the first time I logged in.

After my payment information was in place and the game version was synced to the master copy I proceeded to the character creation process. This began by selecting the region North America. Within the region I was given the option to select a server shard (also known as a *realm*) from which to base the newly-created character.

To increase the breadth of the study and increase the diversity of the sample size I chose three servers on the North American Realm List; a PVP server, a PVE server, and an RP server. These servers covered Central Standard, Eastern Standard, and Pacific Standard time zones. This selection was intentional so that I was able to collect data at the same local time on each server in the same evening. My physical time zone was Eastern Standard meaning I was able to log into WoW during peak hours from 6:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. Eastern, then log into the Central at 6:00 p.m., even though it was 7:00 p.m. my time. I gave myself an hour for additional notes and by 9:00 p.m. Eastern I logged into the Pacific server at 6:00 p.m. as well. While this study does not cover behavior relative to time zones within WoW, I elected to operate on the same server-relative time zones in an effort to establish as much of a cross-server consistency for data collection as possible to best standardize the influence of the time of day as it related to the rhythm of social life. The final reason that I chose these particular servers was the

ratio of active players above level ten. As the membership of WoW was separated into two factions, alliance and horde, I felt it was important to conduct the research on a server which had as close to a one-to-one ratio of Horde to Alliance as possible so as not to skew the data in favor of one faction or the other. Without knowing if PCs' initiatives, interests and desires were influenced by faction type, I felt it would best represent the population as a whole, not just Alliance or Horde. While there are realms with larger populations, they were farther from the one-to-one ratio I was looking for. Even though other servers had smaller populations with ratios closer to one-to-one, the ones I chose had the best of both attributes; they were the best available ratios of the most densely populated servers. In order by name, gameplay type, time zone, and population ratio of Alliance to Horde, the three realms used in this study were: Bleeding Hollow – PVP – EST – 1:1; Moon Guard – RP – CST – 1.7:1; Suramar – PVE – PST – 1.8:1.

I standardized the character creation, class, and group role between all servers with the exception being race as Gnome is not available for Horde faction and Goblin is not available for Alliance. Even so both races fit within the same thematic niche for their faction. This coupled with an even distribution of data collection time spent on each character and data collection time of day the same across collection days was in an effort to minimize any affect my presence, participation, and interaction had on the data. I was concerned that collecting as a different race/class , and subsequently group role, combination for each server and faction would introduce variables in the results that I would not be able to account for. As the ethnographer, how would I know that any data collected as a Tauren Warrior that was different from that of a Gnome Priest was not a

result of the race, class, and role combination rather than the people I encountered, and for this study the diversity of people is what mattered, not how people in WoW react to different race, class, and role combinations, or how behavior of PCs differed between 10:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. in-game. To pull the focus away from these things, I tried to standardize as much of my presence as possible (and their exposure to me), while still enabling a breadth and depth to the study that would be useful for isolating the diversity of player and the pursuit of their initiatives, interests, and desires through a navigation of WoW and each other.

Character Creation

After selecting a realm with all of its qualifying attributes, I progressed to the character creation screen. The character creation process gives an individual the ability to customize a character to their liking. Figure 1 is a screenshot of the main selection screen during the character creation process. With each selection the center character image changed to suit my most recent choice. In the top left were the choices for gender and underneath it was the race selection. The left side of the banner is distinguishable by the word *Alliance* and the right side by the word *Horde*. These represented the factions that the six races underneath them belong to. The thirteenth option is displayed at the bottom suspended between the two banners. It represented a neutral race that could belong to either faction. The thirteenth option is new as of the most recent *Mists of Pandaria* expansion. At the very bottom left corner is a "more info" button. When selected it brings up additional information about each race. This information is shown in the large boxes on the middle-left which expanded to elaborate on a race's strengths and natural abilities

after which some flavor text is added to situate those strengths within the history of the race. On the far right is a list of classes available for selection. As noted previously, there are 11 classes and not all classes are available to every race. Blizzard denoted this feature by greying out unselectable race-class combinations. Because I had previously selected the "more info" button for background on race it also displayed the more information option on the classes on the middle right part of the screen. Where the more info screen for a race contained backstory and strengths, the class info screen elaborated on what type of role that class played in the group, how that role is conveyed, and what armor a class can wear, and what type of damage they produce. Underneath that information was also some flavor text to elaborate how those roles are used in an imagined community. By selecting the race Gnome, and the class Priest, and hitting the button Customize, I finished this set of selections and moved onto character customization.

Figure 1: Selection Screen Shot

The customization screen is less elaborate and set up similarly to the selection screen.

The gender selection box is in the same place, but instead of the faction and class banners

on the left and right of the screen respectively, there are customizable features on the left,

and a visual representation of the those features. The customizable features include skin

color, face, hair style, hair color, and facial hair. When I selected one of these features,

the right side populated with pictures of all the variations of that customization feature

that were available. For example, if facial hair is selected on the left, the right side would

present a graphic representation of all the available types of facial hair available. As I

selected options the avatar in the center of the screen changed to preview how that option

would look. Additionally, there is a "randomize" button to randomize a characters

appearance. After completing the customization process, I was asked to choose a name

for the new character. This option also had a randomize button which would have

generate random combination of letters. After I selected my character's name, I selected

"finish" which transported my newly created projection into the world of Azeroth to

represent me.

I first underwent the character creation process in the roleplaying realm Moon

Guard. Out of the three gameplay types, I believed that character creation in roleplaying

was the most significant because I would need to role-play any selection that I made and

used that same design across all servers and factions.

I decided that I would to be represented in Azeroth as a researcher and that if I

was roleplaying a researcher I needed a character's occupation to match for characters

created as a part of both Alliance and Horde factions. After selecting the realm Moon

Guard I read through the text and subtext of each race and narrowed my choices down to

Gnomes for the Alliance, and Goblins for the Horde. The subtext of these race as well as

their listed strengths portrayed both races as intelligent researchers and crafty inventors,

as close to a social science research role as I was going to get. For the classes I wanted

something that would be easy for me to exist in the game as both a solitary player and

one that was often needed in a group. From my own years of experience in games (WoW

and others), the most sought after classes for group play occupy the roles of Tanks and

Healers. For consistency, I wanted both characters to be the same occupation and since

not all classes are available to every race cross examining the two left me with the

choices of Warrior or Priest. With these in front of me I was forced to consider what

would provide me with the most access to groups and in keeping with the roleplaying

aesthetic, what would represent one that observes and documents, which led me to select

the class of Priest. I selected a Gnome priest as my presence into the Alliance faction and

a Goblin Priest as my representation in the Horde faction across all three servers. Also in

keeping with my desire to portray myself and my intent transparently, and after many

trial and errors of name that were already taken (player names were unique within a

faction and were unable to be duplicated), therefore I needed a unique name. I settled on

Anthrop as the Gnome and Anthrup as the Goblin, both variations on Anthropology. The

variation was a conscious choice, as Anthrop is closer in accuracy to the word

anthropology, since he was on the side of good (Alliance), and Anthrup as a slight

corrupt variation on anthropology to emphasize a more corrupt nature as being part of the

forces of evil (Horde), though quests and experiences blur the lines of such binary

distinctions as good and evil they were thematic distinctions to separate PCs in the game.

After Moon Guard, I recreated these two characters on the other realms of Suramar and

Bleeding Hollow.

Entering the Research Setting
Anthrop was spawned into the world of Azeroth as a Level One Priest (Figure 2).

Equipped with a backpack, Bent Staff, Neophyte's Robe, Neophyte's Pants, and

Neophyte's Boots, he awakened in a high ceilinged room full of broken inventions and

19 other gnomes, 18 of which were NPCs and one of which was also a Level One PC.

The NPCs appeared to be in the middle of, or recuperating from, combat. The room was

in specific area called "The Old Dormitory" a section within a dungeon known as

Gnomeregan. This dungeon was near a Gnomish outpost of New Tinkertown, all within

the territory of Dun Morogh on the continent of the Eastern Kingdoms. The setting of the immediate area was a system of man- (or Gnomish-) made caverns overrun by creatures. In the vicinity were beds, rugs, tables, chairs, and a makeshift barricade, all the makings of what one would expect to see from a group dormitory. It was from this starting position that I began my data collection with every version of Anthrop across each of the three servers.

Anthrup's beginning was similar in form if not location. Awakening in the antechamber of the Kajaro Trading Company (KTC) headquarters, a Level One Goblin found himself facing the NPC Sassy Hardwrench who had a new quest available. The room had wooden floors and throw rugs, stone walled with tables, lamps and a beanbag chair and maps covered the far northern wall. Just outside the door the Anthrup found himself on sitting atop a weed-strewn semi-paved hillock on the outskirts of the city of Kezan. Kezan encompassed an entire island as part of the continent of The Maelstrom. Similar to Athrop, all the versions of Anthrup began their experience in this same room, on the same hillock, in the same city.

The visual setup of the graphic user interface (GUI) more often referred to as the user interface (UI), was the same for all starting characters. Displayed in Figure Two, the UI was the mechanism through which I saw what the character saw and navigated interactions with the world and others through the character. While my perception of the game was seen through Figure Two, other players saw that individual as the graphic representation similar to every other figure I saw in that image. Had they not been NPCs and characters driven by people instead I would know nothing of their motivations other

than the simple actions of the observed. At this juncture it was easy to see how diversity

is constrained by mass uniformity of presentation in the virtual world. The top left of the

GUI displayed the character portrait which was represented by a facial shot of my

character. Underneath and partially overlapping the portrait in the bottom left of the circle

was a number which indicated my character's level. Attached to the portrait on the right

side were three other bars: name, hit points (HP), and power. The name category

displayed whatever name was given to the character during the creation process. HP was

the amount of life a character currently had over the maximum amount the character can

have, in this case it is 134 (current HP)/134 (maximum HP). Power was the blue bar used

by the character to enact his special skills, spells, and abilities. Similar to the setup of HP,

mana was displayed as the formula of currently available mana over maximum capacity

of mana; 68 (current Mana)/68 (maximum Mana).

Figure 2: Anthrop's Research Setting

One might ask, what purpose does it serve to recreate the same experience three times over on across two factions? What does this do for the study that two characters, one Anthrup and one Anthrop do not? The goal of this repetition is stability, control, and consistency. I used three similar setups (i.e., the same race, class, name, time zone operating hours) in an effort to control as much of the situation as possible to create repeatable experiences across each zone rather than a set of out of context individual experiences weaved together to created whatever opinion I desired. I unified the characteristics for the horde and alliance factions to control the mechanical variables of the platform from which the lived experience of each of these characters take shape. Similarly, so that the lived experience can be compared not only across servers or factions, but in an effort to discover if individuals existing in this space can have different

experiences when subject to the same environmental circumstances. A single character's experience on one server illustrates that the experience can happen. The results of multiple unique experiences could reveal more than any single experience could. For example, three experiences of similar like on different servers under relatively the same conditions could allude to a central shaped experience, or three different experiences across three servers under similar conditions illustrate the potential for different experiences to exist under than same shaped technological mediation. These are just two examples of what can be yielded when using more than one or two experiences as the testing ground for a sound analysis that would be representative of the community as a whole.

Data Collection

Conducting an ethnographic study in WoW proved challenging because any interaction was mediated by the technology involved in accessing and interfacing with WoW, and the technology that hosted the experiences within the space itself. In an effort to fully explore the role technological mediation played in the construction of experience, I employed an array of data collection techniques and tools to understand and mitigate the effects that technological constrains imposed on my ability to understand the intentions and perceptions of those that were copresent with me inside WoW.

I collected data in RP, PVP, and PVE server types where I deployed two characters per server with one in each faction. I constructed the research this way so that no single server type or faction would be a dominant source of data. I gathered the qualitative data through observation, semi-structured interviews, informal single and

group interviews and small impromptu focus groups and quantitative data was drawn from surveys. Additionally, by gathering both quantitative and qualitative data I was able to situate the quantitative survey information within the qualitative data gathered through participant observation.

There were also a number of linguistic considerations when negotiating the terrain of a digital place like WoW. As I was a native English speaker, I anticipated the challenges of existing in a space dominated by a foreign language and decided incorporating the barriers of foreign language would broaden the scope of the study too much. Before venturing into a space that uses a different primary language, I felt that it was necessary that I conduct such a study in my own language first. Therefore, I limited the scope of this study to North American servers. While English was definitely not the only language spoken in chat channels, it was the primary language of the game space. This means that English was not only the primary language of chat channels but was also the language used in the UI and by the NPCs in WoW.

Village Mapping

Mapping the areas I engaged with respondents throughout the process of data collection was different inside WoW compared to what it would have been in a more traditional physically-present fieldwork setting. For example, a map the surrounding area was available at any time by pressing the *M* key on the keyboard. This was because, as a new player, Blizzard wanted to make the process of integrating into this new world relatively easy therefore every character's starting location was already mapped out. As I ventured further into the land of Azeroth I found that pressing the M key only revealed

the outline of the area, with everything inside the boarders obscured and in need of

discovery. This act of discovery was performed by traversing the area within the borders

of a particular zone. In WoW, the map revealed my current location within a current area

or zone which was one of many zones that together formed a continent. In this sense by

exploring I drew my own map the more I traveled. That said, it does not help to describe

the setting as it existed separate from the previous description of environment, because it

did not differ from that description. There are unique elements to one area or another;

Orcish housing was made from animal skin, bones and dried clay whereas elven and

human dwellings were of stone, wood, and brick, but seeing as I did not limit myself to

one area, one specific surrounding did not frame the data collected in a particular way.

Demographic Data

When creating this study I felt that collecting demographic data would have

jeopardized the anonymity of the characters I engaged with and pull focus away from

other areas of inquiry.

Participant-observation

Participant-observation has long been recognized as a fundamental method in

anthropological inquiry (Bernard 2006:342). It allows anthropologists to experience life

in the culture under examination and the opportunity to understand local knowledge and

behaviors contextualized within the day-to-day activities of its people. For these reasons,

participant-observation was my dominant method of data collection and served to typify

interpretation and motivations and was used to create frameworks to which I situated the

decontextualized information gathered through the surveys.

I conducted participant observation in public areas, as a member of a two-person to five person groups (both Pick-up groups or *PUG's* where participation was determined by whomever was immediately available and groups created for a specific purpose or *premade's*) and 8 to 25 person raid. The data was collected in virtual cities, dungeons, and wilderness environments. Other data was collected through pseudo-snowball sampling where a single individual would invite me along to participate in a larger group activity (Bernard 2006). I spent a great deal of time observing in cities or at least would start periods of observation in cities. However, I found that often individuals were reticent to cooperate without compensation if I demanded the whole of their attention. As a result, I often found myself waiting in the cities, or outside zone lines for parties, in *looking for group* channels, and participating in the activity of traversing the game space by oneself or *soloing* until I happened upon another individual or group that was looking for one of the same objectives. This happened quite often, in which case I offered my assistance in game, told them about the research and sometimes they would accept and sometimes they would not. Revealing myself as a researcher caused individuals to respond in a variety of ways such as interest, curiosity, apprehension, paranoia, and, on rare occasions, anger. On occasion, I grouped with random individuals and did not probe for research or guide the conversation. In these instances I participated in the game aspect of WoW but not the social aspect of grouping. I just observed and did not identify myself, participated as a normal, if quiet, group member until the resolution of the quest and moved on to the next quest sometimes finding another group and so on. I practiced this

usually at least once a week to expose the research to everyday conversations and chatter as it occurred amongst group members in a more organic fashion.

Additionally, I conducted repeat observation a number of times though I did not purposefully seek it out. Sometimes characters that I had previously encountered, but that did not know of my research, invited me along for other activities days or even weeks after our initial engagement. Other times I ran into PCs that I had previously grouped with who knew of my research and we grouped again. I perceive these as similar (though not duplicate) experiences because I was with the same character though I had no way of knowing if it was the same person behind that character that I had previously encountered.

Survey Recruitment

I recruited respondents for both surveys and interviews through advertisements in general chat channels. This meant that many people I encountered were already aware of my research intentions. On a few rare occasions individuals sought me out without having advertised myself and requested to participate in surveys or semi-structured interviews.

Informal Group Interviews

On a number of occasions an informal group interview arose due to a respondent extending the interview to a newly formed party. During this time, I had conducted an interview with one respondent while questing and as other members joined the party the respondent asked the individuals that had just joined their opinion on the topic. This situation occurred most often when I was participating in the social component of group

cooperation and the game element of questing. As I did not offer respondents compensation for their time, I found myself having to participate in the game experience with other characters in order to engage with them for a long enough period of time in which we could converse. Otherwise, individuals were less inclined to spend the whole of their time and attention conversing with me when they could be simultaneously participating in an element of the game. In a way helping them achieve some in-game goal was an indirect compensation.

Focus Group

One specific interview turned into an informal group interview. This particular group on the PVE server was particularly interested in networks, as a result the group interview turned into a small short focus group study about the extension of networks in game. While this occurred spontaneously in the PVE server, I intentionally replicated the network focus group on the other two servers.

Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview was a more difficult to implement than I expected. The traditional semi-structured interview was not responded to well and I was forced to adapt in structure if not in content. The multitasking needed to participate in-game with the respondent and simultaneously orchestrate the direction of the interview and take notes proved difficult. The first few interviews were without multitasking but there were very few respondents willing to give away game time to the interview process. I adapted it to a participation/interview, recorded the conversation through the chatlog command and revisited the text immediately after to record any notes. While this was more chaotic

than the typical interview, yet the respondents seemed more comfortable to talk freely when they were accomplishing in game tasks. During these sessions even though the respondents appeared to be more comfortable they were less articulate because the act of multitasking occupied their hands. During these times I recorded a much higher use of WoW shorthand as a more efficient way of getting thoughts across both from the respondents and to a limited degree, from myself. As part of the social bargain made for the interview was for me to take on a group role and perform in that capacity as best as I could. There appeared to be a correlation between my performance and the willingness of the respondent to continue the discussion. If I did not perform well in my role as the group healer (i.e., let the respondent's character die because I was typing or taking notes) then, and perhaps this was just my imagination and imposing my own interpretation of their intentions on the situation, but I felt that the answers less freely given and conversation petered out.

The methods I chose all centered on understanding the experience from the point of view of the respondent. I believe that these methods drew out unique and globally applicable themes more representative of the population than previous case studies. Through random sampling, advertisement, participant observation and surveys, this collection of data represented the community as a while from the most casual to the most dedicated of players. Additionally, conducting the research allowed me to understand this information from the perspective of the respondents I had interviewed. I accomplished this by recording the experience through my computer while participating in an in-game experience that we had created together. This allowed me to be co-present with them,

granting me a greater access to their mind and a deeper understanding of the way the

respondents interpreted experiences inside WoW.

Analyzing the Data

After collecting the data I embarked on the process of sorting, coding,

constructing and interpreting the date through a lens of thematic network analysis

(Attride-Sterling 2001). The reasons I chose to thematically analyze this data is threefold.

First, the process has been well grounded, documented, and utilized often in ethnographic

research. Second, by utilizing a thematic analysis, I was able to integrate the qualitative

data gathered from interviews and participant observation and open-ended survey

questions, and the quantitative data collected through surveys. To do this, I selected key

words from the core questions of the thesis, the qualitative data, and the topics imbedded

in the surveys. Third, a separation into thematic elements and further into networks will

help elucidate the nature of WoW as complex, multidimensional, overlapping, and

simultaneously unique. In conjunction with thematic coding I elected to apply a network

analysis to engage not only the salient themes relative to my research but to further

illustrate the interconnectedness of these themes as they encompass spheres both in and

outside the digital space as well as demonstrate the potential for the former to influence

the latter and vice versa.

This mode of analysis can be separated into three distinct phases: reduction,

exploration and integration. The reduction phase was the first phase of this process was

separated into three sequential steps. The first step was to code the gathered material. The

data first underwent the process of coding in an effort to reduce the gathered information

into manageable, applicable, and meaningful segments of text. I began the process by cementing a coding framework taken from research questions, collected data, and areas of interest. This framework was modified to include applicable but unforeseen themes as they emerged ad hoc during data analysis. Establishing the framework early helped rein-in the large quantity of data that I collected, and helped focus the study on the questions at hand despite the emergence of other interesting, but tangential, themes. Next I distilled the collected information through the process of coding. With the framework of codes established, I sorted through interviews, logs, conversations, surveys and other data for recurrent topics, phrases, actions, quotations and other pertinent segments of text.

The second step in the reduction stage was the identification of themes. For this step, I collected all the codes and sorted the main data concepts revealed in the previous steps into groups of relevant themes. Next I cross-referenced the themes in each stack of code with the themes of each other stack of code to look for patterns, progression, commonalities, connectedness or other areas of interest that emerged from the comparisons. Next, I refined the themes already sorted in the stacks of code into themes that were "(i) specific enough to be discrete (non-repetitive), and (ii) broad enough to encapsulate a set of ideas contained in number text segments" (Attride-Sterling 2001:392)

The third step in the reduction stage was to construct thematic networks out of the existing set of themes. I had already begun this step by comparing stacks of code to see if patterns emerge. However, once the themes were refined, the patterns and trends were easier to discern. In the first part of this step I took the refined themes and sorted them by

common elements, ideas, theories and content, effectively subdividing complex themes with multiple elements into more simple themes focusing on a few elements at a time forming the Basic Themes of the thematic network (Attride-Sterling 2001:392). I then clustered the basic themes around shared topics to reveal Organizing Themes. After which I took the basic themes, their relationship to organizing themes, and derived a "core principle metaphor that encapsulates the main point" (Attride-Sterling 2001:393) in the form of a global theme of this particular thematic network. Lastly, I revisited the initial themes drawn from the text to make sure that they could be represented accurately in the thematic network by remaining applicable to their respective basic, organizing, and global themes.

The second phase was the exploration phase where I ground the themes revealed in the previous stage within the situational context of the originating text. I used text segments to help describe the interplay of the various themes of the thematic network at work within the negotiated experiences of respondents in WoW. I pursued this through a description of the contents of each global theme and its interaction, priority, and placements within organizing and basic themes.

My next step in the second phase was to summarize the contents of the previous step. The exploration and explanation of the themes were summarized to reveal any trends and principal themes that emerged as a result of the description of the network. The point of this step is to state these emergent themes even if they had already been hinted at in previous steps. I then resituated these emergent ideas into the experiences of the respondents as representative of individuals, group, and global communities of WoW.

The final phase was the interpretation and integration of all the collected, refined, and summarized data. In this phase I brought together the results and summaries of the thematic networks coupled with applicable theory to "explore the significant themes, concepts, patterns and structures that arose in the text" (Attride-Sterling 2001:394). The intent of this was to bring any theoretical assertions about the data back to the original questions in the study and apply relevant theories. I then supported them with text segments, quotations, and experiences and narratives derived from the collected data.

Lastly, I underwent three additional reevaluations of the original basic themes. These reevaluations looked at each of the servers types (I.E. PVE, PVP, RP) separately and evaluated them for trends specific to that server type. This allowed me to ascertain the prevalence and density of particularly prominent themes and their relationships and representation in the thematic networks.

As a mechanism to help contextualize and understand the PCs experience, symbolic anthropology tells us that that the source of an individual's interpretation is based on a shared cultural system of meaning among members of the same society (Des Chene 1996). Utilization of this perspective affords anthropologists and other social scientists the opportunity to employ familiar ethnographic methods to the study of virtual worlds; familiar in that they are reminiscent of methods used on physically-represented societies. While this level of analysis is productive in cataloging and understanding behavior and meaning in the virtual world, it only addresses the reproduction of behavior and meaning to the extent that the built-in mechanical limitations of the virtual world will allow. The problem with the interpretation is that WoW is being viewed as either pristine,

separate from and uninfluenced by the physical world, or that WoW superimposes its own rules and culture on its members so completely that its members are indoctrinated, oblivious to the concerns of their local to where their body resides.

The data in this section was gathered over 300 hours of participant observation, 15 interviews, and 80 surveys across three North American WoW servers. Each server was situated within a thematic element of PVE, PVP, or RP, and paired with a time zone. This was done for three reasons. First, it enabled a broader more multi-sited approach to the study. Second, it allowed me to explore what made each space unique. I isolated the data from the three different server types and compared themes that emerged as a result of the analysis of that type to themes of the other two spaces. Third, it allowed for the creation of overarching theories common to WoW. In the process of discerning what made the server types unique, I also encountered what made them similar. These overlapping trends illustrated overarching global themes common to the PCs lived experience in WoW. This kind of comparison was only made possible due to data collected from other server types and server. It would have been difficult to accurately represent the population without engaging them through a variety of servers, environments, and time zones.

Coding the Material

While evaluating the data gathered from participant observation and interviews I noted a number of topics and terms that continually emerged from the data collected. I cross-referenced those topics with ideas present in the survey results and compared them to the themes and questions embedded in the theoretical perspectives of this study. This

88

allowed me to distill this information into 19 codes. These codes were "discreet enough

to avoid redundancy, and global enough to be meaningful" (Attride-Sterling 2001:394).

Table 2: Unsorted Codes

Character	Point of View	Experience (Lived)	Game Mechanics	Elements of Gameplay
Account	Relationships	Communication	Grouping	Maintenance
Ownership	Location	Interpretation	Cooperation	Barriers
Perspective	Motivation	Feeling	Coordination	

Sorting and Grouping Codes

Using the 19 codes, I sorted through the data that I had gathered during the

collection process and compiled a list of issues. These issues originated from ideas,

terms, text segments and fragments of conversations that were applicable to the codes.

With this information, I separated the 19 codes and corresponding issues into nine

distinct groups (Table 2). I grouped the codes into categories based on overlapping

content and thematic elements evident in the issues. This initial grouping reflected a

symbolic approach to organization, where the interpretation of symbols covered the

conveyance of ideas amongst PCs and the interpretation of those symbols informed a

meaning intrinsic to the PC performing the interpretation (Figure 3). By sorting this way,

the interpretation of the initial grouping focused on symbolic anthropology's

interpretation of intent, meaning and imagination within global social influences.
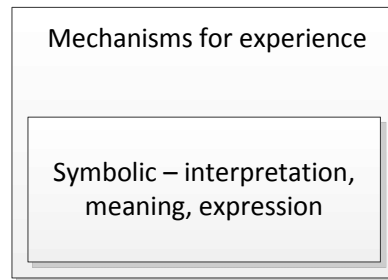
Figure 3: Symbolic Approach

Cataloging Issues and Identifying Basic Themes

I used the 19 codes to reevaluate the data and took note of emergent themes

present in the text segments, the situational context surrounding the text segments, the

server type the text segment originated from, and the number of text segments applied to

each theme.

In breaking down the information by theme type, I illustrated the density and

prevalence of each issue within each type of server (Table 3). This method allowed for

analysis to take place both globally and locally, and revealed themes homogeneous across

all servers while still allowing for the possibility of uniqueness within a server and

avoiding a generalization of a reduction of all to the same.

Table 3: Density and Prevalence of Issues

Codes:	Issues:	Distribution			Total	Codes Cont'd:	Issues Cont'd:	PVE	PVP	RP	Total
		PVE	PVP	RP		Character	Proficiency	32	9	46	87
Relationships	Guildmembers	23	45	35	103	Account	Mastery	32	75	19	126
Maintainence	Friends	9	11	24	44	Ownership	Competence	24	18	17	59
	Dislike	11	16	1	28		Performance	21	16	64	101
	Family	29	2	4	35		Reputation	24	38	33	95
							Level	16	50	16	82
Feeling	Emote	45	16	24	85		Experience (xp)	30	47	33	110
Interpretation	Expression	19	35	16	70						
	Meaning	43	21	39	103	Perspective	Being there	28	13	39	80
	Inflection	8	1	44	53	Point of View	First person	11	18	41	70
	Drama	17	28	13		Experience (lived)	Third person	23	38	10	71
	Emotional response	37	38	41	116		Anonymity	16	13	18	47
	Emotional investment	10	3	26	39		Identity	64	53	53	170
	Intimacy	31	28	23	82		Self-image	59	13	47	119
	Context	20	6	33	59		Player Character (PC)	65	46	78	189
	Situation (as it occurs)	24	38	33	95						
						Motivation	Commitments	25	16	38	79
Grouping	Solo	30	7	42	79		Obligations	36	74	41	151
Cooperation	Guild	33	31	13	77		Responsibility	34	69	38	141
Coordination	Raid	18	30	21	69		Addiction	39	64	58	161
Communication	Party	24	18	40	82		Habits	26	14	18	58
	Group	22	23	37	82		Routine	13	22	6	41
	Network	50	47	38	135		Needs	31	28	33	92
	Talking (voip)	34	56	2	92		Accoutability	10	35	28	73
	Chat (channels)	11	28	31	70		Role	24	31	11	66
							Achievement	27	49	16	92
Elements of Gameplay	Crafting	21	17	24	62		Escapism	21	8	30	59
Game Mechanics	Quest	28	27	41	96						
	Solo	17	28	31	76	Barriers to:	Recognition	22	2	50	74
	PVP	23	113	32	168		Access (connectivity)	23	48	13	84
							Content	19	11	24	54
Location	IRL	24	17	2	43		Presence	30	12	45	87
	Online	36	15	13	64		Performance (Mastery)	35	66	16	117
	Environment	19	24	31	74		Expression (Communication)	36	12	34	82
						Data Point Totals:		1638	1787	1821	5246

Determining Organizing Themes and Reevaluating Groupings

The next step was to discern organizing themes that tied together topics covered in the basic themes. However during this process, I discovered a number of basic themes that did not fit within the symbolic and interpretative organizational boundaries of the organizing themes. Additionally, many of these unused basic themes related to the creation of experience through an individual's negotiation with the mechanical aspects of

the space. This exposed the shortcoming of my current methodology and emphasized my need to reevaluate the structure of interpretation to incorporate the role of technology. The new model of analysis recognized the importance of a symbolic approach that focused on social influence, interpretation, and imagination, while allowing for experience generated by interactions with and through the more binary limitations inherent in the mechanics of gameplay. Because of this, keywords were drawn into groupings I had not anticipated and the shape of the categories shifted from purely socio/cultural groupings to a hybridization of social elements that remained cognizant of their shaping through mechanical rules.

Mechanical Constructs/ Artificial Structuralism

Mechanisms for social and environment experience

Symbolic – interpretation, meaning, expression
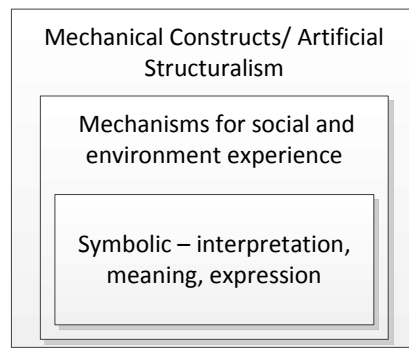
Figure 4: Revised Symbolic Approach

Shifting from the layout of Figure 3 to that of Figure 4 recognized the addition of mechanical influence to the creation of themes and analysis. Figure 4 illustrates the influence of artificial structuralism functionalist perspective on the entire digital experience. Here I drew on multiple theoretical approaches and combined them to address the complexity of WoW as a mechanical and virtual space. This is because both

92

the mechanical and social components need to exist for WoW to exist as a place and thus their influence upon one another interpenetrate. From a social perspective, the space provided the tool for social mechanisms to function and location to foster experiences of meaning. Similarly, WoW needed the subscription of its members to stay functional. If the membership's commitment to the space dissipated and it ceased to be profitable, the company that funded its existence will shut it down. In this way, WoW and its members experienced a symbiotic codependent relationship. The space needed its members to exist and the members needed the space to participate in the experience it provided. Next, the diagram illustrated that the mechanical and programmatical architecture of WoW was pervasive and ubiquitous, its logics and grammars mediated every action that took place inside it. This can be articulated though an artificial interpretation of structuralism as WoW programming was ruled by binary laws where language and action either were or were not possible. The program dictated what actions were available, and how action was specifically presented for interpretation. Drawn from Geertz (1973) and Turner (1967), this approach allowed me to engage with the symbolic interpretation and expression through a pursuit of initiatives interests and desires both individually and socially, while remaining cognizant of the artificial structural limitations on the conveyance of language and will.

WoW allows for individual action and encouraged group participation by creating game elements that were accessible only though cooperative activity with others. Therefore, understanding how such action and ideas were conveyed by seeking the "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action" (Turner 1967:36),

whether those influences are of social or mechanical origin, are formative mechanisms worth noting. Similarly, as mechanical laws inherent in WoW dictated how individuals could communicate, interpret, and imagine the meaning and intentions of each other, then the analysis of such events need the "sources of illumination" (Geertz 1973: 45) that interpretive anthropology provided.

Deducing and Verifying Global Themes

Next, I linked related organizing themes together and distilled the nature of them to a single super ordinate topic. I extracted four global themes from 12 organizing themes. I tested the global themes against the organizing and basic themes to confirm that they were representative of the data. The overarching nature of these central topics, coupled with the ability to thematically trace their roots through both organizing and basic themes lent them a pervasive relevance, and confirmed their role as global actors.

CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter explores the data collected by using a symbolic interpretation of the data through the thematic network work analysis that was outlined in the previous chapter. It brings together direct conversations, quotes, and vignettes collected throughout the research and couched them within locally and globally present themes.

Motivations of Digital Existence

The first global theme (Appendix 1) focused on the nature of digital existence. The branches of this thematic network are comprised of three organizing themes and 20 basic themes. Digital existence, a process in which an individual was continually re-presented by a projection of self, was constructed and maintained for the purpose of pursuing and fulfilling initiatives, interests and desires. This network explored this focus within the contexts of group and individual identity, roles, and elements influencing experience.

The first organizing theme of this thematic web centered on motivating forces conveyed as initiatives, interests, and desires within a PC's initiatives, interests and desires. It explored what motivated people to exist and to continue to exist in WoW. Understanding the role of motivations was key to understanding why individuals choose to participate, with whom, and by incorporating what elements, the combinations of which created unique and potentially significant experiences. The first theme drew on

examples and discussions taken from the data collection process. By exploring their own

wants and desires and its relationship to their motivations, respondents suggested that the

pursuit and fulfillment of initiatives, interests, and desires encouraged and sustained their

participation in WoW.

These segments are taken from recorded conversation logs using the chatlog

function and all character names are replaced with random pseudonyms that

corresponded to the gender of character.

> Anth: Good here, ready to turn in?
> Luke: ya, 1 sec tho have to get the last corner.
> Anth: Have to eh?
> Luke: ya, cant leav haf a map explored.

This example had more depth than it may have initially appeared from a few lines of text.

To fully understand its implications, the text must be situated within previously

established game elements and game mechanics of WoW. Additionally, in all texts in this

chapter my participation was represented by the name Anth.

First, in this example Luke and I interacted with a game element called a Quest.

Quests have tasks that, once completed, are given back or turned in to an NPC or

interactive object (e.g., a bounty board), for a reward of experience, items, or currency.

The information given as part of the quest is called back story, or color and flavor. Quests

almost always have back story attached to them in an effort to humanize the experience

of dealing with an NPC. By weaving a story with personalized details, quests encouraged

players to become more invested in the digital world which contributed to their sense of

presence. The type of quest Luke and I interacted with is known as a collection quest.

Collection quests usually require players to locate and obtain a requisite number of

specific items. Unlike other types of quests which can be completed through group cooperation, collection quests often required each member of the party to collect their own items.

In this instance, we were tasked by an NPC to search for a message in a bottle and pointed to a location where we could begin. The lines above occurred as we completed the task by collecting bottles on a beach. For this example, to demonstrate the complexity of language and its symbolic implications I created a line-by-line transcription and translation of my conversation with one respondent.

Line 1- Anth: Good here, ready to turn in?

In the first line by saying "good here" I signaled to Luke that I had collected everything I needed for the completion of the quest. By asking "ready to turn in?" I checked with him to see if he had the requisite number of bottles needed to turn in the quest for the reward. This is common courtesy when questing in a group. However, if unaware of this interpretation the phrase "turn in" could have also meant turn in for the night, turn in to the authroities, or turn in[to] something, as in transmogrify.

Line 2 - Luke: ya, 1 sec tho have to get the last corner.

Luke's answer of "ya" meant yes. However, the second line "1 sec tho" was a request for me wait temporarily and he implied that he had something to finish. That something was revealed in the next part of that line with "have to get the last corner". This statement meant that there was a corner of this area (terrain) that he had not discovered and he had to register its discovery before moving on. Interestingly, there is no game mechanic that

required him to discover all of the locations in our area. This is confirmed in the next two lines.

Line 3 - Anth: Have to eh?

In this line I questioned what this new objective was needed for and his motivations for obtaining the mystery objective.

Line 4 - Luke: ya, cant leav half a map explored.

In the final line, Luke confirmed that he had felt the need or desire to explore the remainder of this area because he could not leave parts of the map undiscovered. The act of discovering was a game mechanic that registered the existence of a specific area on the character's map, which was opened by pressing the M key on the keyboard.

In this example, Luke used a term that implied that he was compelled to complete the exploration of the area. He is one of many individuals that described their interaction with specific game elements and with each other using either the language of compulsion, such as need, must, desire, and have to, or the language of willful pursuit such as like or want. Luke was a *completionist*. The term *completionist* in this context was used to describe someone who had an almost compulsory need to complete something fully and explore all options beyond what was required to complete the quest by the mechanics of the game. This term was not considered derogatory; it merely illustrated a specific style of gameplay that was employed by a group or individual that sought that type of experience. There are varying degrees to which someone could be a *completionist* from needing to pursue every option that presents itself, to merely being interested in fulfilling one particular element, akin to Luke's perspective with discovery. In this case Luke

pursued and fulfilled his need to complete exploration of the area. But in doing so he set aside a task that offered a greater reward, and made secondary his involvement in a shared social experience. Expressed in terms of need, one could posit that his need for completion temporarily outweighed his interest in a social, performative or progression-focused experience. Respondents like Luke characterized initiatives, interests, and desires as the motivating forces that directed their participation inside WoW. This theme addressed those motivating forces by including both the social and mechanical foci of the needs and desires. According to this theme, people exist in WoW to satisfy those desires. If WoW fails in that regard, or if the desires change, the players either engaged with a new element, or they ceased to play.

Luke may have expressed his needs in the form of achievement but there are many other ways respondents expressed the wants and needs that motivated their pursuits. Some described their wants and needs oriented toward being the best at their class (mastery), or accessing the highest level of content (progression), but these focuses are rarely exclusive. Players could combine various games elements to fulfill a singular need, or a single element that filled multiple needs and roles as was the case with a player named Ron.

> Ron: Guild meets in vegas every year, we take a road trip out from cali.
> Anth: Oh yeah? Cool. So who's "we"?
> Ron: Me and the wife. Some of our friends from school once ina wile.
> Anth: Nice. And you all play?
> Ron: Yeah, I think the wife plays to chill with me, never get her to raid just group stuff. my own raiding's gone casual.
> Anth: So you useto raid more?
> Ron: Fuck yea. Hardcore.
> Anth: How hardcore's hardcore? Weekly?
> Ron: try nightly. Almost flunked out b/c of it, but didn't want to repeat so. Plus the gf almost kicked me out.

Anth: because of the gaming?
Ron: some, more from not showering. Got fat too. Wish I could go back.
Anth: and do what?
Ron: play more! Miss it.
Ron: Gotta grow up sometimes Sides we got lots of friends on here and I don't do phones.

In this segment of a conversation Ron displayed many linked motivations. Ron's reference to his past habits of gameplay illustrated that he used gameplay to remind him of a previous time, and noted both a physical and habitual difference in self. His remark of "hardcore" showed his previous self's priority of game mastery and a commitment to reinforcing the bonds of a guild as a social group. The idea of a guild as a social group is also reinforced by his statement that they all "meet in vegas" every year. He suggested that the collective experience his guild created was significant enough to warrant reinforcing those ties in and out of game. In a similar fashion his relationship with his wife out of game pulled her into digital participation where her motivation for existing in WoW was the social experience she could create with her husband. Underlining this entire conversation was a ranking of the priorities of motivation. For his former self, advancing through end-game content via raiding and his guild as both an organization and social group mattered more than his physical appearance, personal hygiene, college grades and almost more than his relationship with his girlfriend. Yet a change occurred as the initiatives, interests, and desires of his new self redirected his priorities. While in game experience was still important it became less so when compared to graduating college, obtaining a healthier body/bodyimage, and fostering a successful relationship. Even so, he was reticent to give up the game entirely because of the significance of the social bonds he formed during in-game experiences. While its role and priority in his life

100

had changed, he still used the game as a mechanism for communication where there otherwise would have not been one because as he stated "I don't do phones".

My conversation with Ron exhibited a number of motivations. During the research process I compiled and reduced a list to 30 different stated motivations from Ron and many others. Please refer to Table 4 for a complete list.

Table 4: Motivations

Motivations		
Achievement	Exposure	Reinvent the self
Addiction	Freedom	Relationships
Anonymity	Group identity	Relaxation
Belonging	Habit	Respite
Commitment	Mastery	Responsibility
Communication	New experience	Routine
Community	Pleasure	Satisfaction
Companionship	Privacy	Stability
Defiance	Reassurance	Solice
Escape	Recognition	Therapy

Transition from one element to another was a pervasive truth that affected nearly everyone at some point during their time participating in WoW. Transition represented a time where there was a shift in the initiatives, interests, and desires of a player. This appeared as a reprioritization of existing initiatives, interests, and desires, as with what happened to Ron, or it can represent the addition or subtraction of these needs. The idea of transition sparked discussions as to the nature of participation within WoW. Through multiple discussions, participation was revealed to be not a static thing as the impression of a preprogrammed unchanging landscape might imply but a fluid activity awash with improvised meanings driven by changing initiatives, interests, and desires. The

101

respondents Ian and Kim experienced transitions using the same game elements, but their experiences resulted in a change in their interests in different ways.

> Ian: The game is secondary. I even get a little bored of it sometimes. What's that line? , come for the game stay for the people?
> ------------------------
> Anth: Do you still raid or even work with the guild?
> Kim: Nope, not anymore. Too much drama, turned me off to raiding, They think an awful lot of themselves and I got tired of it. I like it, the idea of it, and there cool end game shit. But that doesn't mean you have to be a jerk about everything, I mean everything. Being well equipped in wow doesn't mean you're well equipped to be a person irl.
> Anth: So what do you do now?
> Kim: 10 mans, pugs mostly, pl'ing friends, but no guilds. Not interested.

Ian, Kim, Ron and many others took part in transitioning from one element to another. They participated in the same elements but experienced those elements differently, and as a result these experiences informed on how their directed future pursuits. Not only did Ron and Ian remain in the game to be involved with people, but they stayed to be involved because of people despite a waning interest in playing the game. Alternatively, Kim's experience with her former guild was significant enough to cause her to not just abandon her guild and join another, but abandon the idea of the guilds, forsaking that significant social component. She departed from a semi-permanent group identity in favor of more transient groupings that require less or not as intimate of a commitment.

For Ron and Ian, relinquishing bits of their anonymity led to a significant social grouping, but for Kim it led to disenchantment with the very idea of a formal group identity. Her desire to experience game content outside of a guild was re-enabled by an increase of anonymity. This topic created discussions on whether meaningful experience could be shared without sacrificing anonymity. Many agreed that it could while others agreed it could not. This ambiguous answer was explained by understanding that the

conditions needed to form significant experiences differ when engaging with various

levels of anonymity. Thus the meaning of anonymity and what it offers differs between

participants. For some it was viewed as a mechanism to hide, for others it freed them.

Unencumbered from a responsibility associated with self-identity, anonymity set the

platform where initiatives, interests, and desires took shape. Anonymity was a powerful

agent in WoW for those agents that chose to use it. For some respondents it was a desire

in and of itself, and for others it was a conduit through which PCs felt free to act upon

other interests. For some like Ron, it meant a reinvention of the self.

> Ron: Gotta grow up sometimes

For Meg, this idea of not being anyone and yet still having a voice appealed to her.

> Meg: I could b ne1. I could b a grl, u don't know. U cud b 1 2. That's y its fun.
> Anth: true, would you want to know?
> Meg: y? u want2 tell me?
> Anth: Not what I meant. Would you want to know if ppl were male or female if you could?
> Meg: I can ask. y would I want 2?

> Trans: Meg: I could be anyone. I could be a girl, you don't know. You could be one too. That's why it's fun.
> Trans: Meg: Why? You want to tell me?
> Trans: Meg: I can ask. Why would I want to?

Interestingly, existing case studies that cite anonymity's use as a tool (Boellstorff 2010,

Bainbridge 2010, Langer 2008) neglect to counterpoise the significance of PCs' agency

in determining anonymity's influence upon their motivations and experiences. The

symbolism in differing degrees of anonymity from those that seek it as intrinsic and

necessary for digital existence, to PCs that either do not care about its role, or care with

lesser significance, can inform on how it directs the pursuit and existence of a PC's

initiatives, interests, and desires. Especially when anonymity is valued and used differently to create experience

Players I interviewed used anonymity to strengthen relationships, feed addictions or explore one's own imagination. For them the benefit of anonymity as a tool was that it enabled true motivations to be brought to the foreground. It created a space where nothing prior to itself mattered unless the player wanted it to matter, because no one kewn that it mattered. Individuals knew their own history and were affected by it (as anonymity did not erase that self-realization), in the same way that Strathern (1992) suggests that the interpretation of current experience informs on how people think about future experience. As such PCs can choose to sacrifice anonymity, if the exposure helped create the type of experience they wanted to pursue. In the absence of personal history, the game provided everyone with the same set of tools to engage with game elements and relate to one another. Additionally, even when utilized as a tool, it did not shield PCs from creating or participating in experiences that resulted in a shift to their motivations of digital existence, as is what happened with Ron's guild meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The second organizing theme of this network explored the effect the self and collective identities had on the initiatives, interests, and desires of initiatives, interests and desires. Many of the responses that inspired this theme differentiated concepts of identity and self in a way that separated group influence from individual influence within those needs and desires. In making this type of distinction the organizing theme presented a binary view of influence, claiming that either a person is influenced by the group or they are not. Such a claim left no margin for conflict or integration between the two

104

identities and as a result such a perspective attempted to flatten what is otherwise a dynamic association.

The analysis of this topic was difficult for some respondents initially. Discussions often began with the disambiguation of the concepts of identity and the self. From observing, questioning and documenting many exchanges revolving around identity and self, most respondents broke the question down into one of two queries.

1. What is the difference between Self Identity and Group/Collective Identity?
2. What is the difference between personal sense of Self and a group sense of Self?

The reasons many respondents had a difficult time differentiating the two was colloquial semantics. In this example both identity of the self and group identity was often referred only as identity, and the personal self and the group self was only referred to as self. This argument revealed that the assumption behind why identity and self are confusing and appear to be the same was because their terms were used interchangeably. When the colloquial use of self and identity include both personal and collective references of the self, then they do indeed appear to be the same. However, even though they appeared to be the same, respondents explained them with subtle differences. Reduced to a singular idea, respondents suggested that the term self was referred to an individual's perception of their entire person. One respondent, Leon, explained it as "It's what you think about yourself when youre alone. nobody to impress, none to let down". Conversely, Identity was understood as a social construction. It is the result of a meeting between the self and the collective identity of a group and as a respondent Pat stated "whatever emerges from that encounter is your group identity."

If group identity is perceived as a conflict between two entities, a person's self

and the existing identity of the group as it had been negotiated by its members; these two

identities are constantly in flux. Group identities have a trickle-down effect on their

components' sense of self, and similarly, the sense of self has the potential to influence

the group's collective sense of identity. My encounter with Jun, who is an active raider

for almost two years, explored this during a conversation.

> Jun: Manner raids? How boring would that be?
> Anth: You can pass the time talking to each other. Can't you?
> Jun: not there to hang out. but couldn't be there without eachother either. I only ever hang out with a few of them alone.

In this instance Jun and I conversed about his participation in raids. *Manner raids* were a

type of raid where the raid leader had made a rule that members must behave respectfully

toward one another. Sometimes these types of raids are also noted by movie codes like

PG-13 or G to give guidelines about how to act. These rules are purely social

construction and as such they are enforced socially. Violations of these social

constructions included penalties that disqualify a player from obtaining a reward by

rolling for loot, a fine to be paid to the guild bank, or ineligibility to participate in future

raids for a specific amount of time. These types of raids are often the exception, and Jun

finds the alternative to be more amusing. Jun, unlike some others, enjoyed the

participation of the raid but not for the individual social components the raid provided.

He was interested in the identity of the group dynamic as a whole and the access it

afforded him to game content, experiences, and rewards but he displayed little interest in

engaging with his guild members outside of the activity of raiding. Jun's identity as part

of this group was a raid member, and his initiatives, interests, and desires were to

experience end-game content that could only be accessed through raiding, to enjoy the problem solving aspect of raiding, and little interest in exploring his relationships with these people outside of the activity of raiding. Jun subscribed to raiding as both a pastime and the access this group identity afforded him. Additionally the experience with Jun revealed that raids and guild are saturated with roles that inform on member identity.

Manner raiding represents a cultural division between opposing behavioral ideologies. Just within the guild there were semi-permanent leadership roles of guild leader and officers, banker, and quartermaster that managed activates of the guild. Some of them were an earned status obtained by skill or knowledge such as the position of raid leader whose job it was to safely guide the raid. Others were competitive roles based on mastery such as class leaders who were perceived as the most skilled at executing the duties of their class compared to every other person of the same class in attendance. Others obtained a role of achieved status such as the guild tank whose job was only partly based on individual skill and largely based on equipment obtained. Within these socially designated roles, there were subdivisions in the roles of the classes themselves. Mentioned in an earlier chapter, the classes were DPS, Healer, Tank, and CC. On some occasions when the area or limited number would require it, groups and guilds requested or forced their members to change roles. Some classes were more limited in that flexibility. However, roles played a large part in participation and involvement in cooperative activities. Wanting to be involved, especially at higher levels where a greater amount of mastery was more necessary, was rarely enough on its own to afford someone the opportunity to be a part of end game elements. Roles, the willingness to conform to

the needs of the group, time commitments, were a few requirements to participate in certain cooperative game elements. If a person's desire was to experience some of these more difficult elements, then they must have let some of their group identity be shaped by the needs of that group. In the same way, group identity can affect not only the group experience, but also any other experience an individual needed to participate in in order to be eligible for that group identity. This is true for guilds of all focuses whether it is raiding or end game player-versus player. The exact requirements may have differed, but that fact that they all required something to be a part of their identity remained constant. When I asked PCs what was required for me to join their group these were their replies:

> Miller: PVP ranking, what else?

> Charley: Raiding, 7 to 10 tues to thurs EST. Friday is pug night.
> Anth: What is Pug night?
> Charley: its our noight for pick up raids or 10 mans with friends. Do what you want, but you gotta be online for that if you want in on the big ones.

> Jill: T6 or above and a full set of cold resist gear.

> Liu: Have to be in a party with a member 3 times, and they've have to vouch for you. Enough votes will get you into a casual raid night, its all invite only. We only make exceptions for IRL family and friends of our members.

When asked, each of these representatives had conditions that had to be met prior to being considered for their guild. Some even go on to talk about websites, formal applications, letters of recommendation, video applications, and Skype interviews. For the applicant, these prerequisites highlighted elements and roles they would need to pursue as a requirement to be involved in a particular group identity. The processes were also telling of a groups own initiatives, interests, and desires with how highly they value mastery, proficiency, success, advancement, or achievement. If a PC wanted to be

seriously considered for placement, they would have to adopt the goals and perspectives

of the guild in order to be considered as an applicant. Lastly, these responses also

demonstrated that these particular processes are not bound to WoW despite originating

from and being directly applicable to WoW. They pass through boundaries of digital

space to encourage actions in the physical world. If such elements were not significant to

some then these actions would not exist on such a widespread scale nor would it need to

traverse such boundaries.

These responses illustrated diversity in motivation that belied the graphically-

oriented sense of sameness that WoW projected. The same tools of game mechanics are

made available to each player. A player uses these tools to pursue the initiatives,

interests, and desires that are of interest to their sense of self and group identities. A

player's initiatives, interests, and desires and in the pursuit of these interact with game

elements. An individual chooses to exist in digital space in an effort to fulfill initiatives,

interests, and desires that stem from motivations born of the self and its identities.

Multiplicity and Fragmentation of Social Life

The second global theme (Appendix 2) concentrated on the nature of multiplicity

bound to contemporary social networks. Informing on this are the ideas that networks

traverse the boundaries of physical and digital and also part casual and part significant.

Through this topic respondents explored an underlying and pervasive discussion on

relationships of significance, while not confining their ideas of social reality to any single

location or degree of significance. The central four-part theme of the scope and

significance of social networks were broadened into two organizing themes and eight

basic themes. The organizing tier of themes explored the topics of network size, maintenance, influence, significance, access, and effect. The basic themes reinforced these notions by exploring networks through the proximity and location of significant and insignificant members.

The first organizing theme reflected that relationships were not bound to digital or physical space. The end of the previous section noted the existence of this when referencing guilds in WoW using application processes to vet potential members and in noting Ron's guild meeting in Vegas every year to reinforce their social bonds. Both examples illustrated two pervasive capabilities that have been enabled by technology.

The first is that technology has afforded people with the opportunity create and maintain relationships both physically and digitally. This means that relationships of all kinds can be created through physical interaction and reinforced through more physical interaction, and relationships that are created digitally can be reaffirmed digitally as well. What this also means is that physically created relationships can be maintained digitally and digital relationships can be maintained physically. These might seem obvious but what is also capable is the simultaneous navigation of all versions of these relationships.

Viewing this through Ron's experience, he created relationships digitally by making friends in WoW. At the same time he also fostered new physical relationships and soon found the negotiation of them both to be in conflict. With these new relationships the initiatives, interests, and desires that influenced his motivations shifted and he resolved the conflict between the two relationships and was able to maintain both. The influence of the WoW extension of Ron's network had an indirect yet profound

impact on the part of the network that included his girlfriend. In a similar fashion and

through Ron, the part of the network that included his girlfriend had an intentional effect

on the wants and needs surrounding Ron's playing habits. Not only can physical or

digital relationships be negotiated through physical or digital means but demonstrated

through Ron, part of his own networks affects other branches of his network that

otherwise had no relation to the other. The simultaneity of network presence and its

maintenance was not always beneficial.

> Nic: I can yell at my mom, play the game and text my friends all at the same time.
> ------------------
> Jules: Ever accidently text what you meant to say in chat, or say in chat what you were gonna text?
> Anth: I can't say I have.
> Jules: Dont, it gets akward.
> -------------------
> Ben: Got up to take a leak and my roommate came in drunk and said sum shit in chat that got me
> kicked out of my guild.

The second pervasive capability of networks due to technology was its persistence. The

influence of networks and the relationships that inhabit them are always present. Since

networks are no longer limited by time, space, or plane, continual exposure to such

networks constantly made other networks subject to their context. That is to say if an

event occurred within one element of a network, it can ripple through to other segments.

Nick's case was an example of fragmentation (Lifton 1999), the delivering of one's self

or its reproductions through multiple avenues. Nick demonstrated that he is the focal

point that connected three separate aspects of his network. Contemporary discussions of

this topic may reveal that fact to be unremarkable. However, its significance does not lie

in Nic, but the fact that anything that affected him was instantly transmitted across

physical and digital spaces simultaneously. This was evident when he revealed to me

later in the conversation that the reason he yelled at his Mom was because of something that happened in game. His frustration from one segment of his network leaked through him into another instantly and caused negative repercussions.

Jules experience advised a note of caution against over-fragmentation. Such a downside was evident in the intermixing of networks, which when viewed as a singular event only represented a mistake but when viewed in concert with other similar mistakes represented a fragmentation that alluded to a "lost grip on reality". This same respondent wondered if a link will exit for her generation between technology's increased fragmentation of the self and a rise in cognitive illnesses involving memory (specifically dementia) but was not covered in this thesis.

In the last quote, Ben's story described an occurrence that had been becoming increasingly common, someone else's interference in a network. For Ben, his computer embodied his identity and the ability to represent him. His guild in WoW understood that relationship and trusted that it was indeed him that was being represented through his computer and navigating the landscape of the game. However briefly, Ben-the-person and Ben as the perceived character became separate entities. He had lost control of a fragment while still being responsible for its actions. Examples like this were increasingly seen outside of WoW with credit card fraud or even picking up another person's phone and texting a number. Collectively these three examples represented some of the vulnerabilities and the dangers of fragmentation.

The second organizing theme focused on the maintenance of social networks in relation to their scope. A person's social network is made up of smaller social groupings

woven together to form an individual's social reality. This way of interpreting social

networks creates an image of interconnected personal networks that expand outward from

a central point, and each point representing a person at the center of their own social

reality. Advances in technological areas like communication have enabled networks to

undergo expansion in a scope unavailable through more physically-traditional means. It

presents such networks as vast, immediately accessible, and effortlessly maintainable.

Many respondents were amenable to this vision of contemporary social reality,

but then found themselves hard pressed to keep it when confronted with integration of

significance and meaning. Superimposing significance onto the relationships, represented

as points in the network, caused the networks to become stratified by meaning. When

viewed this way, a person's social network positioned relationships with the greatest

personal significance closer to the center point and relationships of lesser significance are

further away. When questioned why it was divided one respondent suggested it was

related to the effort of maintenance.

> Lori: its not enough to know someone, espeicially if most of what you know of them comes from the internet. You can have friends list a hundred people strong and still only really KNOW about 10 of them. Some might be friends of a friend, some might be friends of a friend of a friend, some might be a person you ran into once in group and planned to look them up but never got the time, some might be people you like to play with a lot, and some might be friends or family you know from IRL and you may not see them on much but want to be notified when they are. I have a lot of different friendships on here, like I have a lot of different friends outside of WOW. my friendship is stronger with some than others. There's no WAY I can have 100 good friends on here. Some are bound to be stronger, and those are the ones I usually spend more time with. I mean they are usually the ones I want to spend more time with too , and others I'm friends with over something specific, like we have the same guild or the same friends. I even have a fishing buddy. I wouldn't talk about my family or problems to my fishing buddy, and I'd be weirded out if she started up one day about hers. Our conversations are mostly about the fishing skill, technique, and tournaments, locations. When I go fishing I send her a tell and that it. If I'm not fishing we never talk. We are still friends, but we are casual friends, but I spend a lot more time on my friendship with others, the people I WOULD talk about my family too.

Lori's relationship with players in-game varied depending on the nature of the activity surrounding their friendship. She spent less time and effort on the casual maintenance of her less significant fishing relationship than she did on her more significant ones. Additionally in using her friends list as a metaphor for social network, Lori's statement reflected the idea that the initial image of these networks can be misleading. In her opinion they did not contextualize the significance of those relationships. Additionally, out of context and only represented by total number, networks appear vast. onlookers would only view her network as a number with an ambiguous meaning.

When I spoke to another respondent about his friendships, he mentioned that much of his networks maintenance was left up to the mechanical element of social network platforms.

> Louis: I dont have to talk to em myself. They can see my status update and thats enough. Its like talking to em all at once without having to waste time sending them any of em msgs. neone important will know if there is more to the story. In WoW its my autoreply, in fb its my status.

Both of these experiences comment on two crucial concepts. The first concept informs on the idea that relationships of significance of meaning require more effort to maintain than less significant relationships. In Lori's example the relationships that were significant to her were the ones she communicated with more often and on a more personal basis. Louis framed it similarly. He alluded to the idea that the people that are more significant are more informed because he took the time to inform them. The second concept is that people relied on themselves to maintain the more important relationships in their social networks and relied on others and technology to field the less significant relationships of their networks. Louis left it to the technology of automatic replies to keep the less

significant relationships of his network informed, and Lori displayed a more casual approach to the maintenance of her less significant relationships and went so far as to say that she'd be "weirded out" should a less significant relationship presume to be more.

Technology allowed for the construction of large social network structures. However, it also created the illusion that relationships embedded within the network held a universal value. These structures were interwoven between physical and digital boundaries.

As these networks traverse such boundaries they extend with them the influence of significant relationships. The maintenance of such relationships was no more confined to their originating locale than the structures themselves. When questioned, respondents indicated that the effort given to maintain a relationship is indicative of the significance of that relationship. Therefore the less significant a relationship is the more its maintenance is given over to another (often mechanical) entity. The more casual a relationships is the less a persons' motivations are given to its maintenance thus the less it impacts that persons initiatives, interests, and desires.

Network Group Interview

During this study I encountered many interviews and group interviews that were the result of participant observation. During one such instance a group interview organically evolved into a small focus group. The topic we discussed involved the pervasive and yet dramatized breadth and nature of social networks. Our topic focused on how social networks were vast but that vastness rarely meant anything to the individual. Individuals, they said, were more influenced by those closest to them than by the

sensationalized size of their "networks of 6 degrees of separation" (one respondent's reference to the theory that any two people can be connected through a maximum of six steps). During a lull in conversation I asked the other four members in the party to send me a tell (a private message) of "the names of the first 10 people that pop into your head". After gathering the names, I asked each group member to identify from where they knew each person on their respective lists. I gave them the choice of in-game, in real life (IRL), or both, and asked them to identify (if they wanted to) whether they thought these people were male, female, or unknown. This discussion initially occurred on the PVE server, and I chose to replicate it while in a group on both the PVP and RP servers as well.
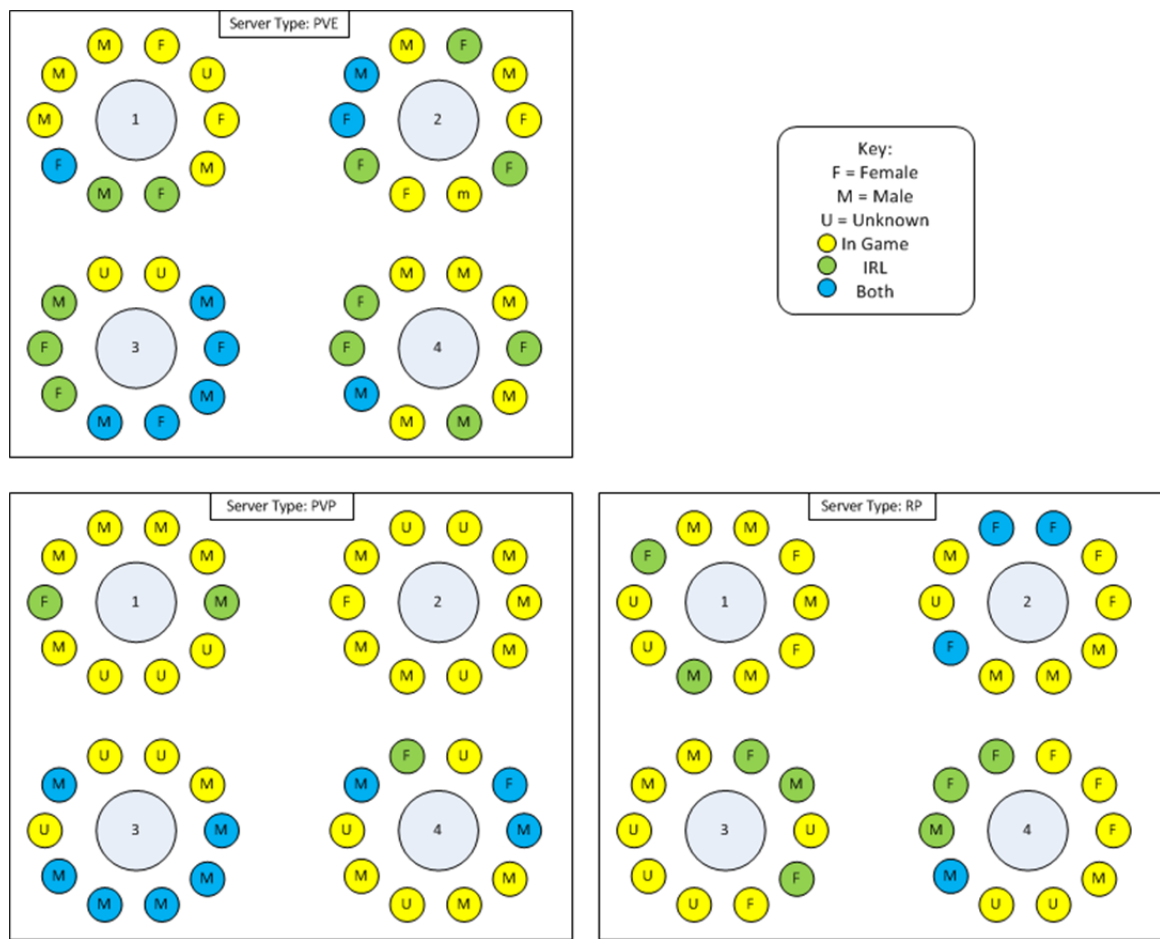
Figure 5: Diagram of Group Interview

Synopsys of the Group Interview

The data (Figure 5: Diagram of Group Interview) showed that 37 of 40 (92.5%) people that the respondents on the PVP server first thought of were known to them through in-game relationships. Nine of the 37 (24.3%) of the game-related relationships reported were known to the respondents both in and out of WoW, and three of 40 (7.5%) of the relationships first thought of by the respondents on the PVP server were of people outside of wow.

117

On the RP server, the respondents cited 32 of 40 (80%) relationships to be related to their experience in WoW and four of 32 (12.5%) were known both in and out of WoW. eight of 40 (20%) of the relationships respondents first thought of existed strictly outside of WoW.

On the PVE server where this experience initially had spontaneously occurred in conversation, 28 of 40 (70%) cited relationships were affiliated with WoW and nine of the 28 (32.1%) WoW-related relationships existed both in and out of WoW. Whereas, 12 of 40 (30%) of the total relationships thought of had no relation to the respondents WoW experience.

Across all the server types, 12 people were asked to name the first 10 people that came to mind. 97 of 120 (80.8%) relationships thought of were related to WoW, and of those 97, 75 (77.3%) were known exclusively through WoW and 22 (22.6%) were known through both WoW and IRL.

From this data, some deductions were made regarding the networks on the three server types, as well as generalizations concerning the experience that those networks provided (Table 5). All server types exhibited the dominance of in game relationships at

Table 5: Relationships

	IG	IRL	Both
PVE			
M	12	3	5
F	4	9	4
U	3		

	IG	IRL	Both
RP			
M	11	3	1
F	8	5	3
U	9		

	IG	IRL	Both
PVP			
M	15	1	8
F	1	2	1
U	12		

the forefront of their thoughts. As this occurred in WoW, I expected that the surroundings would influence the number of relationships an individual first thought of. PVE servers showed the largest proportion of significant relationships outside of WoW at 21, a combination of relationships that fall under the categories of IRL and Both. The RP and PVP servers show a total of 12 relationships that exist outside the game. However, the RP and PVP servers experience an inverse relationship between the categories of known in both IRL and in game and strictly IRL. Where respondents on the RP server documented a relationship of eight (IRL) to four (both), the PVP server documented an occurrence of three (IRL) to nine (both). This data suggests that the population in RP servers experienced a greater conceptual separation between experiences in WoW and those in IRL. Alternatively, the data from PVP servers suggest that participants of that server type experience the least amount of distinction between online and IRL relationships. Not only did this PVP server have the largest number of strictly in-game relationships, but also displayed the largest number of relationships in their networks that incorporate WoW as an element in that relationships. The data from the respondents on the PVP server demonstrated a proclivity for players on that server to prioritize WoW as a mechanism for producing important experiences. If that was not the case then the data would not have been so heavily skewed in favor of WoW participation (i.e., 37 to three). While RP servers may appear to have data similar to that of PVP, their distribution toward 8 IRL-only relationships indicated a greater distinction between WoW experience and IRL experience. However, regardless of server type, the overarching theme this data suggested is that networks and relationships traverse both digital and physical spaces.

Additionally, it suggests that participants in WoW are influenced by relationships housed in both spaces.

The Persistent Effect of Barriers on Experience

The scope of this third global theme (Appendix 3) envisioned barriers as both social and mechanical elements that affected the individuals experience inside of WoW. This Global Theme explored the idea that barriers in WoW constantly and continuously impacted experience that occur in the space. The basic elements of this global theme can be separated into three organizing themes and ten basic themes. The organizing themes splinter between social elements and game elements, both of which are influenced by connection to the space itself.

The first organizing theme emphasized that clearly defined barriers impact experience. This theme identifies clearly defined barriers as mechanical barriers that are created as part of the game, usually to influence game elements. This theme is mechanical in nature, and being so was a product of how the game had been developed. The rules identified by this theme were bound to the game as a platform and therefore continuously affected anyone that participated in WoW. These barriers were present in two main forms, the limitations of expression and conditional access.

Limitations of expression act as barriers through the finite predetermined ways the programming of the game allows someone to express themselves. Characters have relatively free reign with the use of text but respondents suggested that intent and context contribute to the meaning of expression as much as text does. The mechanical aspects of expression were represented by the tools provided to each player; the framework built of

logics and grammars into which a person had to fit their intentions. This acted as a barrier

to experiencing certain initiatives, interests, and desires. In some cases players created

misunderstanding, unintentionally sabotaging a social exchange; other times players

experienced difficulty forging the type of relationship they sought because they were

unable to articulate it properly. Such mechanical barriers revolved around the ability to

effectively communicate and express one's self interests.

> Mel: Its like trying to say I love you but you only can use 10 words. Not just any words, 10 words that someone else chose and none of them are I, love, or you. So instead you try to get across the meaning of I love you as best you can using the words and actions thatr available.
> Chet: Love is easy, anger is hard w/o soundin like a psycho. I can say fuck you to my friend and he will laugh because he knows what im thinking. If I say that to a random person who knows what they will do, they could start stalking me.
> Mel: That's not anger, its you saying fuck you to your friend.
> Chet: but how does the random person know that? They don't know me and they might think im mad at them.
> Mel: Or they might not care.

In the conversation between Mel and Chad, the core element to both sides was the place

of emotion expressing what they intended to express and having the expression

understood and interpreted in the way it was meant. Discussions with respondents

suggested that this was more difficult in digital spaces than it was physically. As the

respondent Suzie put, "Theres just no bodylanguage to go off of. No tone of voice.

Nothing Im useto". Despite the ability to articulate exactly what she intend to say over

text, none of the usual indicators like tone of voice or body language were there to assist

in contextualizing the comment. This suggested that since expression and interpretation

are subject to situational modifiers like visual reinforcement and audio indicators, that the

ability to express something and understand what is being expressed changed experiences

in the game. These experiences and others like them suggested that until technology

improved, any expression in a digital space like WoW will always have this barrier because of its programmed nature as a technologically-bound space.

Barriers of conditional access existed as requirements placed on a character that limited their ability to access game elements. These conditions appeared in many forms, but in essence they all produced the same effect: exclusions. The common forms of conditional access were level requirement, group cooperation, and prerequisite item or experience. The condition of level requirement prohibited a character from accessing a part of the game unless they had obtained or surpassed a specific level. However, if a person's initiatives, interests, and desires do not include leveling as an immediate priority they either have to accept the exclusion by that element or revise their own motivations for participating in specific elements of the game. That interest in accessing level required content must outweigh their disinterest in leveling. The requirement of *group participation* is a rule where it dictates the minimum group size in order to access that content. This can be as a party (two to five participants), a small raid (six to12 participants) or a large raid (25 to 40 participants). This requirement can also affect the type of game elements an individual was exposed to. If a person's initiatives, interests, and desires did not involve group cooperation, or if there was no opportunity for group cooperation (i.e., not enough people or groups are available), then the individual was forced to either change their priority of motivations or accept the mechanically-determined exclusion. Another barrier involved obtaining a perquisite item or experience. This barrier forced individuals to have experienced a specific piece or set of content before being granted access to the element they pursued. This often came in the form of

reaching an achievement, already participating in a scenario, dungeon, quest, or having obtained an item such as a key that unlocked the content in question. This barrier influenced the potential experience in a similar fashion as the others, and that was to force the player to reevaluate the priority of their current gameplay goals to pursue whatever was required for accessing the content or acceptance of the resulting exclusion. Additionally, these restrictions often worked in concert with one another. It was not uncommon for the game to require that the players navigate one or more of these conditions simultaneously.

Throughout the research many respondents commented on the mechanical constrains that bound their experience of gameplay. These clearly defined barriers limited the experience with gameplay by both inhibiting the way characters could express themselves and limiting the content they had access to.

The second organizing theme focused on barriers created by social mechanisms. This theme explored the more ambiguous barriers that were created, maintained and enforced socially. Unlike the barriers that stem from mechanical limitations built into gameplay, these barriers were more ambiguous because they were a product of culture. As such these barriers were altered to fit with the current cultural processes and likely change as those processes change. That is to say that culture influences the experience that individuals have inside WoW by erecting and managing barriers. The previous section outlined examples of mechanical restraints placed on an individual's ability to experience certain aspects of gameplay. In contrast the cultural formations in WoW had an effect on the experience of gameplay especially with regards to group participation.

Culture cannot dictate which individuals are allowed to play the game. However, culture can influence how individuals played and the content and resources they had access to in order to achieve their initiatives, interests, and desires. Culture in WoW was interpreted and imagined through the regular social negotiations of its participants. However, the actual production and maintenance of culture was largely performed through the semi-permanent group formations of guilds. While these negotiations happened outside of guilds, the institutionalization of guilds afforded them the ability to retain and project agreed upon cultural norms. Many guilds represented these norms through rules and codes of conduct which were spread out through the community as members of the guilds interacted with each other and the general population of a server through a patterned sharing. Additionally, an individual must conform themselves to a group's code of conduct if they wished to experience content that was only available to large group. Guilds have functions other than housing, projecting and maintaining culture. They often promoted the creation of relationships between members, exchanged resources, and provided manpower for certain tasks. While it was possible for a player to navigate WoW as a single player, soling, from level 1 to the maximum level without having to engage with the semi-formal institutions of guilds, it was extremely difficult that PC to access any content post-maximum level. This post-maximum-level area of game content is known as end-game content. A term which hearkens back to an older style of gaming where winning the game occurred once the maximum level was reached.

Some guilds, often the more serious ones, created barriers to gameplay through the introduction of exclusionary requirements. The previous section on collective identity

and its shaping of initiatives, interests, and desires explored some of the conditions guilds

required of its members in order to participate in game elements. However, these

conditions need to be recognized as social constructions, not mechanical limitations.

> Anth: What are the considerations someone might look at if they are vouching for or voting for a new member?
> Liu: Performance , def performance. But also how they handel themselves in a tough situation.
> Anth: What do you mean by performance?
> Liu: A bunch of things I guess. At least a DPS tracker. a Threat counter too. um… how I think you managed your part.
> Anth: Can you explain what you mean by "managed your part"?
> Liu: Ya, its like if you are DPS, if is how much dmg you did, plus how you managed the damage to keep the aggro down so the tank has an easier time. If youre a tank, its how well you can keep aggro, manage multiple targets and bad pulls.
> Anth: Oh ok. So it's a combination of both your impression of my ability to play my character together with some actual data.
> Liu: Ya, and the general impression of dealing with that person. If they'd be a good fit. You don't want someone you know you will clash personalitys w/.
>
> *Dmg= damage, Dps= Average damage output per second, aggro= how much a monster wants to attack your character, Threat= How much you anger a monster, w/ = with.

This conversation discussed a guild's qualifications of candidacy. In it the guild

representative outlined the elements taken for consideration. In her eyes, both

performance statistics and impressions of character proficiency and personality were

important to the process. In order to be considered for a position as a member of this

guild a PC had to demonstrate proficiency with character class, group role, and a social

etiquette reflective of the guilds standards. In this instance, guild entry was barrier to

group participation and game elements, and technological framework limited the context

of expression.

Organizing theme three centered on connectivity as a barrier to the production of

experience. On this surface it appeared that accessing WoW was a simple matter but as I

delved further into the topic with PC's its complexity became more apparent and

necessitated a more comprehensive exploration in conjunction with the chart on

Appendix 3. The process appeared to be: sit at the computer, install game, update game,

play game, but that was not the case. As noted in an earlier section, the way a PC

expressed thoughts, intentions, needs, wants and desires, and for those attempts at

expression to be understood can change the nature of experience in WoW. Therefore,

when something hindered the ability to express, be understood, and participate in certain

activities, it became a barrier to an individual's pursuit of having the type of experience

they want, and in this way that barrier mediated the desired and interpreted experience.

Much of this study focused on what occurs once an individual is actively engaged in the

space. However, the activity of being engaged with the space was a process that

influenced nearly every aspect of the player's experience because it influenced their

connection to the space. When questioned, respondents attributed their connection with

the space as the root cause for many problems with performance, perceptions and

representation within WoW. These responses revealed that a variety of problems were

being oversimplified and compressed into a central idea of *connectivity*. This interview

presents a good example:

> Rich: Bosses in raids can be difficult on there own. You have to have movements and actions set to timings where 1 misstep will wipe the raid. Alot of players have to turn their graphics down or else they lag in crowded spaces.
> Anth: What causes them to lag in crowded spaces?
> Rich: for just crowded areas? Its gotta be there rig.
> Anth: Does lag happen in other places?
> Rich: Oh for sure.
> Anth: Where else? Is it caused by rig or something else?
> Rich: Everywhere else. Lag can hit any place any time. Sometimes you can expect it though, like in a crowded zone and you know your puter isn't the best, so you run the game on a lower setting.
> Anth: So lag is caused only by a persons computer?
> Rich: no way. It can be the puter, sure. but lag can come from the servers getting bogged down, and bandwidth. Bad connection can cause lag to.
> Anth: can you explain those?

Rich: Well, you might have a good machine but if the servers are havin a problem then it dowsnt matter what kind o' machine you got. The data comin from the servers is going to be chunky even before it gets to you. Not the machines fault, but nothing you can do about it either.
Anth: What about the other one, connection lag?
Rich: ya, that's just if your internet connection sucks. It makes commands you issue take longer to reach your char, and longer for them to react.
Anth: does lag manifest differently if it comes from the server, your computer, or the connection?
Rich: Nope but sometimes you kno tho right. There are clues. Like if you know your graphics can handel an area like you have been there before without problem, then you might have too many programs running in your background, slowing down WoW. If its not that then and you've been there a thousand times without problem, then its probably going to be yur connection.If you know that's workin fine but the other ppl in the zone with you are lagging too, then its probably a server problem.
Anth: how would you know if other people are having the same problem?
Rich: look in the chat channels, when ppl get hit by a big lag spike they talk bout it in chat.

As the conversation with Rich indicated, problems with connectivity could arise as a result of any combination of machine (interface), connection, and host. The difference being that the while all of these factors are representative of the mechanical underpinnings shat influenced experiences in game, only the computer itself can be affected by individual agency and everything else is out of a players control. A computer's restraints are set by the quality of its internal components. These components change as a result of an individual's access to financial resources. The tether of internet access that ties a computer to a particular space like WoW can be manipulated by access to financial resources. However it does not matter how much money a PC may have, if internet access was not reliable at their location, then their experience in game can be altered or works, their competence is questions due to an element of connection that is out of their control. The other factors that affect connectivity as a result of server-side problems (i.e., Blizzard's servers) could not be affected by agency of the PC or through an access to monetary resources as individual PCs cannot influence the mechanical functionality of servers, and thus their connectivity issues are at the mercy of Blizzard.

When questioned, respondents indicated that the task of connecting to WoW could play a large role in how an individual experiences it. They demonstrated that connection to WoW was a complex process that influenced every aspect of the PCs experience in the game.

People are not directly connected to hosted places like WoW. They connect to it through computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones with communication network tethers like satellite, fiber optic, cable and DSL lines. The computers send data through the connection and WoW sends data back to be visually rendered by the computer. This exchange of data is given form through graphical representations rendered by the computers. This is how WoW organizes the diverse and eclectic pairings of computer and connection and the visually unifies the visual and aural experience sent back to the players. In WoW this exchange of information was what facilitated the production of experience. Experience was produced in the space but throughout the course of that production, all information is sent back and forth through the computer and connection. .

In WoW a PC's interaction with another PC or the environment does not happen all at once. To move the character, a person issues a command to the character through their computer, the computer relays the command to WoW servers, the servers tell the computer the character has moved, the computer graphically represents the character moving and the person at the computer sees the character move, in that order.

Similarly, a PC having a conversation sends the first piece of communication to another PC by using their computer. That communique is sent as data from the computer to the WoW servers where it is interpreted and customized in style, font, size and color to

thematically represent a WoW mail item and then sent as a message to the other PC. That PC received it, responds through their own computer, that response would be sent through WoW again before it is received by the first person's computer. It is then represented on their computer screen and they interpret and imagine its meaning and respond accordingly.

As a PC interacted with elements in WoW, their experience is doubly mediated: both by the space itself and by the mediating technology used to interact with the space.

Prior to accessing WoW an individual underwent a process of connecting that pre-mediated any experiences they may have inside the game. Pre-mediation is a conceptual distinction between external and internal forces that both contribute to the mediation of the lived experience inside the game. This distinction was necessary because it acknowledges the presence of mediating external forces that existed outside of the digital space as separate from the mediation that occurred within the space itself. Once established, these forces constantly and continuously mediated all information that traveled between the individual and the digital space they are participated in.

The process of pre-mediation began with an individual's physical location. Physical location can impact the availability of technology. The individual then needed to have the financial means in which to access the available technology. At this point "technology" should be separated between the technology of the mediators (i.e., computers), and the technology of the connection (i.e., internet access) and technology of the space. Differentiating the between the two was necessary because locality may affect each differently. Where financial resources may allow for the purchase of a good

computer, that same person may be located in an area lacking reliable internet access regardless of how much money they may have. The acquisition of pre-mediating technologies had the potential to change with the addition of resources or a change in locality. Until then, these technologies remain static and thus add a predictable pre-meditated expectation that impacts any experience that happens within the space. Rich noted this predictability when referencing lag and said "Lag can hit any place any time. Sometimes you can expect it though, like in a crowded zone and you know your puter isn't the best, so you run the game on a lower setting."

However, I found this process to be so complex that it required a more detailed breakdown of activity shown in Appendix 4. Beginning the process of mediation the computer and tether impacted how individuals re-presented themselves in WoW, their active perception of the virtual world around them, and their ability to perform functions and roles required to fulfill the needs and desires through game elements. The computer affected representation and active perception of the world through the quality of its components and their ability to display the character and the WoW environment. Similarly the quality of its components affected personal performance by altering the computers capability to act upon the world and witness others doing the same in an expected way. Internet access impacted these three qualities by regulating a character's ability to navigate the world and interact with the environment and others in a timely manner. That is to say, it was difficult for an individual to feel as if they were represented by a character when there is a 4 second delay between issuing a command and have that command executed by seeing it played out on screen. Afterward, changes in the

production of an individual's experience involving representation, perception or performance stemmed from a connection that was out of their control.

The next stage described the effect perception, representation, and performances have on the production of experience. The in-game representation of an individual coupled with their performance of activities (i.e., competency) in the world affected how that individual was perceived by others. For example if an individual had a slow internet connection and was killed by what is otherwise an easy monster in game, or their response time to heal a member of their group is poor and the member dies, it can be viewed by others as an inability to perform a specific role, as one respondent put it "hit a lag spike you can wipe the raid, it may not be your fault that the lag spike hit you, but you will still be blamed for the wipe".

The active perception of the world was how the world and its inhabitants appeared on screen to an individual. Whether influenced by internet connection or computer quality, an individual's perception of the world can affect modes of presence and their sense of being there. For some respondents their ability to see, hear, and actively engage with the world contributed to their ability to suspend their own disbelief, engage their imagination and visualize themselves as part of the game. Similarly, proficiency, or perceived proficiency was affected by a PC's ability to perform or master tasks. This was influenced by a player's active perception of how they perform in the world. These elements regularly impacted the construction of experience, and through such elements contributed to both group identities and a player's sense of self. This was demonstrated by noting the path representation, perception and performance can take.

The first example focuses on reliability. A character's perceived reliability was a combination of how proficient that character was and the way that character's behavior appeared to others. This combination resulted in an increase in invitations to participate in cooperative events (i.e., inclusion). Combined with a willingness to participate in cooperative activities, which itself is determined by their initiatives, interests, and desires, cooperative events facilitate subscription to a group identity, and access to specific group-oriented game elements.

A second example is the active perception and a sense of being in the world. When combined with proficiency, this sense can contribute to a characters familiarity with game mechanics and environment. A familiarity with game spaces can increase an individual's chance to participate in cooperative activities and exposure to content can change their willingness to participate through changing their initiatives, interests, and desires. Both of these can impact a characters participation or lack of participation with a group which in turn can impact a characters affiliation with group identity.

In a third similar example active perception of the world combined with proficiency resulted in a competitive comparison of how proficient a PC was compared to how proficient other PCs were. A similar combination as the previous example but instead of ended with a negotiation of group identity, such comparative relationships can also inform on the characters sense of self. That is, a PC's performance in relation to others can influence how a PC views his/herself.

These examples demonstrated the potential impact a pre-mediated stage can have on experiences created in WoW. Additionally, this model demonstrated that there can be

many different combinations of computer components, internet availability, financial means, and locality. Each unique combination could result in a different mechanism to connect with WoW and thus a different experience. This model was formed as a result of numerous observations and stories that did not fit within the thematic element analysis and yet represented a force that could significantly impact the construction of experience. Of the occurrences observed and gathered in the data, one vignette stood out and particularly reflective of these processes.

Empirical Example

Since the advent of digital ordering services like Amazon, Tigerdirect, or Newegg, technology was given the appearance of being at the worlds fingertips. This impression caused physical locality to not seem like factor that mediated experience. However, that is not the case. Despite being on North American servers, I interacted with people all over the world. A respondent Troy helped contextualize this idea of the significance of locality. Troy was a member of the United States Army. He had the financial means to purchase a four thousand dollar Alienware laptop (Alienware is a brand of high end gaming equipment). The quality of his equipment is top-notch. However, Troy purchased this laptop because he was deployed on a 14 month tour in Iraq. Despite the means to purchase a high quality gaming computer and to subscribe to an expensive satellite wireless internet service, Troy's ability to access the internet was poor. Troy's internet connection was poor, which meant his connection to WoW, known as *latency* or *ping*, was very bad as well. He admitted his immense frustration at having a "high ping" when playing because prior to leaving the United States he was extremely

well regarded and highly ranked in mastery of PVP combat. Troy told me that it was not just about his frustration at playing a game; he used WoW as a symbol of being connected with his home, family and friends. When he was unable to experience the game like he had before, it made him feel further away from home. At times he could still chat with his friends via text, but they did not ask for, and he did not offer, his participation in the *arena* (a PVP space where teams fight each other in bouts of ranked matches) because he did not want ruin their ranking. His ping was so high that he would not be able to act quickly enough in game and his character would be killed in the arena, severely weakening his team. Troy's computer was excellent as was his mastery of PVP combat, but none of that mattered because of his problems of connecting to the space, a problem which he could not influence. In this situation not only was his mastery affected, but his methods of communication as reduced to text, the shared experience of being with friends was compromised, and he experience emotional turmoil because of the symbolic significance of connectedness WoW held in that stage of his life.

Expression and Interpretation are Imagined

The fourth global theme (Appendix 5) was a network of two organizing themes and nine basic themes. The thematic group represented the participant's investigation of understanding the underlying forces affecting expression and interpretation in WoW. The exploration is situated within the context of understanding the impact of technological tools and personal worldview on the actions of conveying intent and interpreting meaning.

During this investigation, respondents explored the makeup of an individual's worldview as both intrinsic to the initiatives, interests, and desires of the individual, and an embedded way in which an individual engages with and interprets experiences in WoW. Additionally, respondents framed the use of tools as both an equalizer and mechanism for engagement, whose confining technological nature forced meaning to be imagined.

The first organizing theme focused on worldview as an influencing force in the mind of the individual. Comprised of life experiences, personal perspective, and cultural exposure as they are conceptualized through the body, the idea of worldview is torn between being fundamentally different and culturally similar. In the eyes of the respondents, an individual's worldview was unique to the individual because their body is different thus the way they interpret the world is different. Some argued that part of how a person develops was seeing and understanding the world through the body. If the unlikely event should occur where two people have the exact same experiences and cultural exposure, their personal perspective is the way they see the world was not the same because no two bodies were exactly the same. One respondent characterized her reasoning by comparing herself to her twin.

> Sue: "I'm not saying that having 20 more freckles than your twin will make you a serial killer and him/her a priest. I am saying that my twin and I are different. We look almost exactly the same, but we have different tastes in music and movies and favorite foods. The only thing we can agree on is our taste in men. If we are as same as same can get, how come one of us gets sick first? Why are our tastes different? We were raised in the same home around the same people. Even if we are almost the same, the world doesn't interact with our biology the same way."

This conversation focused more on the biological origin as the source of the dissimilarities between two like organisms. Her position situated a twin's understanding

135

and experience within the biological functioning of two similar bodies performing differently. This example emphasized a common distinction made by the respondents between the biological influence and cultural conditioning hearkening back to the nature vs. nurture argument. The difference being that they saw it not as one over the other, but the influence of each on the other.

When questioned about the way these differences could impact worldview she responded with uncertainty:

> Sue: "I don't know. I mean, I really just don't know. We are different people, and we have different opinions about certain things like I like my character with red hair and she likes hers the way she has it irl, brown. but we have way more things in common than we have differences."

Biological influence of their worldview was in the thoughts of many respondents. However, respondents had a stronger response to factors of the body that they could easily relate to or understand. That is to say, they made a distinction between the internal unknown biological mechanisms that govern the body and the physicality in which they engaged with the world. Sue could cite differences between her and her twin, like a predilection toward a specific hair color of her character. Yet she could not ascertain why those differences existed, nor did she offer any explanation of how those internal proclivities influenced her worldview. However, there were some respondents that did not see it this way. Unlike Sue, Zak was able to identify how his own biology influenced his worldview.

> Zak: "Check it out. I usto be an athlete, but now I've got bad knees and It means I can't run nomore. So when I'm on here, it sounds cheezy right? but it's like I'm running. Killer graphics and a sweetass sound system help this place seem more real, and I can imagine what it would be like to run again but without the knee probs."

136

Zak's worldview was influenced by the condition of his body. His knee problems made it difficult for him to exercise and he developed a perspective that focused his initiatives, interests, and desires around alternative ways to simulate the experience of running. In his case, worldview was not only influenced by his view through his own bodily-limitations, but also framed within and imagined from the life experiences prior to the occurrence of those limitations. Additionally, while this does not relate specifically to his worldview but rather to his financial means, the quality of his computer's composition influenced his sense of presence. In Zak's case, his computer not only influenced his sense of presence, it enhanced his ability to imagine himself being there. From Zaks point of view the type of experience that he used WoW to create was guided by his initiatives, interests, and desires. These motivations were formed through his physical perspective's influence on his worldview. Zak's situation represented a relationship between the body and worldview. For other respondents, the influence of body on worldview was not as poignant. In Sue's case, it was expressed as only the desire to change the avatars hair color, but even this minor influence was still something that influenced her enough to remember it, and for it to arise as a conversation piece between her and her sister. From these examples, the body's influence on worldview and worldviews influence on digital experience seemed to be present to varying degrees.

In addition to biological influences and life experiences, cultural exposure influenced worldview. Respondents suggest that cultural values impact the behavior of individuals in WoW.

Liz: How u behave reflects where u come from

137

Cole: you can tell where ppl are from by how they act sometimes. Some ppl are more easily offended than others.

Greg: After you've been here long enough you can pick up how to act and what stuff means from some people, but that's more about learnin the ropes the game. Everyone adds ther own personal touch to it.

According to these respondents, an individual's behavior can be reflective of the culture they identified with. Additionally, these responses indicated that there were general behaviors and interpretations of actions in WoW. These general behaviors were imbedded in the mechanics of "learning the ropes of the game". Even though there was a standard interpretation to some actions in WoW, PCs attached a personalized variant on that interpretation. In the respondent's eyes, there appeared to be a correlation between length of time spent in the environment and the accuracy in which a PC represented the agreed upon interpretation of actions in WoW. As a character spent more time in WoW, the person became increasingly familiar with general behavior and adapted their own modes of behavior to emulate others. From this perspective, worldview had a decreasing impact on action and interpretation the longer an individual plays in the game. These responses indicated that increased exposure to the social dynamics in WoW increases one's identification with the cultural community of WoW. By incorporating their sense of self into the community, an individual adds a "personal touch" to the interpretation of their role in WoW's collective identity.

Other respondents reinforce that correlation from alternative perspectives. These perspectives emphasized personal investment and equate it to significance.

Kellen: WoW is just a game. We come and go from the game. We live in our own cultures and are surrounded by them constantly. The game isn't as important as that.

Marc: Here we're all the same. equal. it's like death and taxes. all that matters is how much work you put into it, you get better at the game if you want to learn. No one starts as the best.

138

Carl: where ur from dosnt matter, its what this places means to you that matters. Like if it means more you take things more seriously and make it a biggr part of your life.

These responses suggested that the more an individual valued the experiences in WoW, and the more time they invest in it. Similarly, the more the invested into the culture of WoW, the less they were influenced by external cultural perspectives. Similarly, individuals that attached less significance to the space were more influenced by cultural perspectives while in WoW.

The commonality that existed between the respondents positioning of worldview through biological and cultural influences was that the attachments a PC felt toward the game can vary depending on their level of investment. For the individuals that attached more significance to the experiences in WoW, external cultural impact meant less as WoW culture began to mean more. Conversely, the less investment an individual had in the game environment, the more cultural or external cultural influences affected their interpretation and significance of gameplay. However irrespective of an individual's level of investment, experiences when experienced through the body, are influenced by bodily conditions. Therefore, the affect worldview had on meaning in game varied as bodies varied. For many respondents, experience was variable and dependent on how "seriously" an individual participated in the game and was influenced by their own imaginative investment, cultural exposure, and biological circumstances.

The second organizing theme focused on the use of tools provided by the game as the platform for interpreting and relaying ideas to others in WoW. This topic was referenced in the discussion on worldview as the staple mechanics the game gave its

139

participants to interact with each other. These tools were the game mechanics through which players interact with each other and the world around them. They were the commands players used to control their characters and were used to negotiate and engage with each other and the world. They were the pre-programmed social mechanism that allowed players to cooperate, share groups, experience, and communicate ideas. On the surface, these tools appeared to function in a universally similar manner. Indeed, most of the tools are available to everyone. Some have specific conditions such as: a PC needs to belong to a guild in order to use guild specific features like guild chat channels, but most modes of communication and experience via tools were broadly available. While relatively expansive, when these tools are used to express intent and interpret meaning between in social situations, they can be easily misunderstood. This is due to communication's reliance on imagination. The expression of intent and the interpretation of meaning in digital spaces were conveyed through the mechanisms of WoW and thus gave the appearance of uniformity. But, as they are sent and received by humans, their meaning is subject to the imagined expectation of what the expressed idea is supposed to mean, a supposition which in itself is grounded in the person's own life experience (in and out of the game).

Individuals imagine meaning through their expectation of what something should mean. They invoke thoughts of the past by referencing what that same sentence or action previously meant and then applied it to the current circumstance. However, as the collected experiences of an individual traverses both physical and digital space, they bring to these interpretations of meaning their collected experiences relying on

experience to define the meaning in a different way than it was intended. I experienced a subtle representation of this while conducting research a party.

> Anth: sounds good, g2g here
> Mal: What? Now?
> Jen: crap, now we gotta find a replacement, y didnt u say smthin sooner?
> Anth: huh? why?
> Jen: bc you have to go. We talking afk or done?
> Anth: Oh, Neither! g2g=good2go
> Mal: Rofl
> Jen: g2g= got2go, aka leave
> Anth: Ahh, gotcha. Yep, nope, not what I meant. Sry bout that
> Mal: ya, no worries, lot prewowers used it for that. dunno y we changed it.
> Anth: ahh, that makes sense then. neway, rdy here.

My own experience in MMOs situated me improperly for this particular conversation. When I said *g2g* I meant that my character was good to go, or ready for our next battle. The term *g2g* as I knew it had been taught to me in EQ in 2000 and I had used it in this way ever since. However, WoW or the Warcraft community, had redefined the term *g2g* to mean got to go, or I have to leave. I had committed to adventuring into this dungeon and finding a replacement without undoing all of our work would have been difficult. Therefore their misunderstanding and resulting irritation was understandable because they interpreted my statement as if I were saying I had to leave. Mal had encountered this before and understood that we were both approaching meaning from two different contexts, even if the contexts originated from very similar games, though Jen had appeared annoyed at first. Other respondents also talked about this happening. In Chet's experience when he cursed at his friend, his friend understood it to be a joke because of their experiences together. Chet admitted that if he said it to another person without context it would most likely cause offense.

141

This caused a discussion about the role of context. Many respondents believed that context played a large part in ascertaining intentions. Context can be sourced from previous experiences with another person (like Chet and his friend), or it can be drawn from the immediate situation. Regardless, context of some sort was necessary to begin to know the mind of and communicate effectively with anyone a PC engages.

> Beth: Emotion is tough to address. Like when you're frustrated everything you say seems too extreme, but there's not other way to express it. You got to rely on context to keep the tone from being too serious. Like saying diaf to someone doesnt really mean that you mean it. It just means ur kinda pissed at them.

> Jack: We rely on the game to provide us with the context. But sometimes it just makes things more complicated. Ppl just don't get what you mean typing. That's Y theres Vent!

Technology of the game and technology of the computer played a large role in interpreting and rendering any in-game situations in graphic form. In addition to the tools used to communicate, technology also played a part in directing the imagination of meaning. In the previous section I mentioned Zak's use of technology to enhance his experience; however technology can also obfuscate the intended meaning. Respondents note that misunderstandings are commonplace in WoW because it is difficult to predict how someone will interpret things.

> Tim: I have NEVER been rude in WoW. Some people have somehow thought I was rude, but to my knowledge I've never gotten to the point of being rude.

The expression of emotion, especially anger and frustration, is prone to extreme over exaggeration in digital space. In an earlier quotation, Beth referred to the acronym *diaf* (die in a fire) as one such example. She emphasized that in WoW, telling someone to *diaf* is a relatively common way to express extreme (if momentary) displeasure. Respondents

noted the ambiguity of expression to be caused by an insufficient mechanism for expression and the uncertainty of interpretation.

To combat the problem of misinterpretation, technologies have been employed for use in WoW. Ventrillo (Vent), like Teamspeak (TS) and Mumble are voice over internet protocol (VoIP) programs. They were used to augment communication techniques by allowing groups of people to talk to each other in addition to typing. These are all third-party programs (i.e., they are not made by Blizzard), Blizzard has created their own for WoW but was used to a much lesser extent during research due to its poor sound quality. Having a subscription to a VoIP service or being a part of someone else's was a status symbol. It meant that the PC took the game seriously enough to want to perform better and create social bonds. Respondents reported that adding a human voice to a character helped humanize PC, whereas before they were imagined as little different than the NPCs the game provides. One study (Nowak and Biocca 2003) documents the use of imagination in anthropomorphizing the avatars they engaged with. In this study, respondents used imagination to enhance a sense of presence and copresence by envisioning the digital image they interacted with as something or someone familiar to them. This study often incorporated voice overs for the avatars. It noted the degree in which the avatar was graphically represented has a direct effect on the respondent's ability to humanize and relate to the avatar.

PVP, RP, and PVE Theme Prevalence

At the conclusion of the thematic network analysis, I revisited the initial data points and looked for patterns that demonstrated dominant issue across the three server

types. While this intersected with the thematic analysis in that it used the same issues, the objective was to explore topics within the data as a whole and see if specific server types favor some themes over others. The result was that the data points collected from the PVE server exhibited four dominant issues, PVP server had 13 dominant issues, and RP servers displayed 14 dominant issues. These issues show the degree of influence each server type has on the data as a whole. Generalized, the four PVE issues focus on personal perspective during the creation and maintenance of relationships in a digital location. The 13 PVP issues focused significantly on the ideas of achieving game mastery through dedication, group responsibility, competition, and effective communication. The 14 RP issues were centralized around experiencing the environment of the game and its inhabitants, and enhancing senses of presence, copresence, and telepresence. These concepts were significant to the specific servers where the data was gathered. More general themes of meaning, expression, networks, and technological influence were included in the global themes sections of the thematic network analysis. This additional analysis was meant to situate the prevalence of specific dominant elements within those global themes.

CONCLUSION

Prior to beginning this research I was introduced to case studies of WoW as

ostensibly thorough forays into the relatively uncharted cultural pastures of virtual worlds

(Nardi 2010, Boellstorff 2010, Pierce 2009, Bainbridge 2010, Corneliussen and Rettberg

2008). These case studies explored virtual worlds with established ethnographic

methodologies that were forged through practiced investigation of corporal societies.

However, methodologies that were developed to articulate cultural significances in

physically-present societies were insufficient in their ability to fully explore the depths of

newly-created social spaces of virtual reality. The trouble was, as the common phrase

goes, you don't know what you don't know. Even though these ethnographers plied their

trade with great rigor, their unawareness or refusal to acknowledge the need to create

"renewed forms of ethnography" (Fischer 2005: 60) led to approaches that lacked depth

and breath. Their disadvantage was not a methodological one but rather one of

experiential positioning; they were ethnographers before they were participants in virtual

worlds. Having not come of age in the techno-centric environments of today, they were

natively unequipped to see through the otherwise convincing mirage of mass uniformity

that the technology of these spaces projects (Shirky 2009). As a result, methodologies

designed to explore the great depths of culture rendered analysis that were instead

shallow, although by all appearances, convincingly correct. As a participant first and

ethnographic researcher second I found myself positioned to bridge the gap of understanding between a perceived lack of depth and the potential for actual depth, and the knowledge to suggest ways in which the versatile tool of ethnography could be adapted to more accurately describe virtual worlds. This study was designed to unmask that depth, to expose virtual worlds as sites of deep play, and to make apparent the subtle and not-so-subtle ways technology shapes and thereby mediates the expression of intent and interpretation of meaning in virtual worlds, for both participants and researchers alike while remaining cognizant of my own biases and shortcomings both experientially and methodologicially. To achieve this end I approached the study with these questions in mind:

- Do individuals seek to use the same mediating technology for the same, similar, or different reasons?

- Does exposure to technology differently generate different experiences in the same social space of virtual reality?

- What role do the socially and mechanically constructed boundaries inherent in electronic platforms play in meaning, expression, and interpretation?

- Do technological boundaries impact an individual's ability to express and perceive others?

- And what effect do these answers have on the lived experience of individuals inhabiting the same space?

I attempted to answer these questions through an analysis of data aggregated from hundreds of hours of participant observation, 80 surveys, and 15 formal semi-structured

146

interviews. Not counted in this tally were the spontaneous interviews that occurred during regular observation and interaction.

From this research I extracted a few core impressions embedded within the answers to these questions that I cover in this chapter:

- Technological mediation was a confluence of three distinct, yet interconnected points of mediation.
- Technology was trusted to convey thoughts and intentions with the meaning they were intended.
- Technological mediation was most obviously apparent when technology failed.
- The binary distinction of "just a game" versus "more than a game" was too inflexible to articulate the potential for priorities to fluctuate from moment to moment resulting in diversified interpretation of meaning.

The state of discourse that surrounds WoW situating it as a virtual world was defined by, but not subject to, the influence of other technologies (Nardi 2010, Bainbridge 2010, Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008). This perspective illustrated two important points. One, that WoW's projection of mass uniformity was so dominating that it imposed not only structure on expression but limited the meaning of expression so that it could not be symbolically variable, that is to say visual sameness begot interpretive symbolic sameness. Subscription to the idea that mass uniformity meant mass uniform intent and interpretation, these studies regarded any diversity that existed outside of the game as a

non-influential variable, a novelty item, a footnote, a curious but unimportant piece of information. Diversity was equated with any situational or technological factor that existed outside the environment of the game (e.g., occupation, age, experience, gender, locality, affluence, or culture). This kind of interpretation attempted to situate WoW as if it were some distant, isolated, untouched culture, somehow of the world but not in it, free of the immediate trappings of technological and social society.

However, despite this being the prevailing interpretation of virtual worlds, some existing theories about society and technology can be assembled to illustrate diversity of peoples, experiences, and meanings that can be created. Kallinkos's concept of technical mediation established that, historically, societies incorporated and adapted new technology to the operating of its systems and practices (2009). Such is the case with WoW. Not only has WoW become a platform from which interactions and experiences take shape, but also contemporary technologies, especially with regards to communication, have been adapted and incorporated into its workings to mitigate the barriers of its integration into the social lives of its participants. The sense of integration is not limited to games; it is a connectedness that also has expanded the reach and accessibility of social networks, challenged previous notions of placemaking, space, and time, and more general made porous the barriers between the virtual and physical (Castells 2010). This porousness and accessibility also facilitated an increase in population diversity of the place. As spaces have become more accessible both physically and digitally, its population has become increasingly less representative of a single cultural or social background and more an intersection of a diverse group of peoples and

institutions that bring with them their own cultures, perspectives, initiatives interest and desires (Castells 2010, Fischer 2003).

Virtual worlds then are not self-contained, separate, unaffected alternate realities, but rather host to an organization of technological, cultural, and situational diversity (Hannerz 1990). It is perhaps more useful, then, to think about WoW as a site of deep play where the diverse intersection of people and perspectives illustrated a place where language and will operated through the allowed mechanical structures but whose meaning could not be contained as its members were free to imagine and symbolically express and interpret different meanings from the same or similar actions, and where porous technological boundaries allowed for near effortless mobility between physical and digital spaces such that their influences interpenetrated.

The nature of the experiences found at the point where these institutions intersect can be articulated using Strathern's interpretation on the formation of experience (1992b). Her notion that previous thoughts and experiences inform how people think about current experiences, suggests that people used their own experiences (101), and the biological (134), social (98), and cultural pressures (105) that inform them, as a rubric by which they project, interpret, and designate meaning to other experiences[2]. WoW, and indeed other virtual worlds then, are not microcosms isolated and devoid of external influences, but a confluence of people with different past experiences and interpretations of the

---

[2] For supporting examples of experience, biological, social, and cultural pressures informing future experience refer to pages 101, 134, 98, and 105 respectively of this thesis.

world, all colliding, intersecting, and subject to one another's perspectives as each of them negotiates experiences that they jointly (collectively if not collaboratively) create.

However the complexity of virtual worlds does not end here. In acknowledging technologies' adaptation and incorporation into existing social structures, Kallinkos suggests that this adaptation occurs often before society is fully aware of the effects and implications (2009). These technological implications on society can be interpreted through Latour's theories on technical mediation (1994). As access through technology becomes more convenient, the people using it are less interested how the technology shapes their projections of agency (convenient or not) that are conducted through it and more interested in the output, or end result. Correspondingly, with a decrease in awareness of how their actions are mediated they are also less cognizant of how that mediation impacts their interpretation of others, and equally how others' perceive them. As a general process then, technology shapes any experience conducted through it. This relationship is represented in WoW through the way that the logics and grammars that comprised WoW's architecture organized a diverse group of computers and connections and systematically and uniformly presented them in the virtual space of Azeroth. Where the systematic reduction made convenient – so as to be effortless – the assemblages of interface, connection, and host, and sutured – so as to go unnoticed /or/so as to make invisible – the resulting mediation that shaped, directed and (at least visually) represented agency in action and interpretation, in WoW.

Technology of Place, Space, Time, and Social Networks:
As the purveyors of their own agency, even if technologically shaped, there seemed to be a direct correlation between a PC's attachment to WoW as a place and the degree to which they valued experiences in game. This often occurred in direct relation to prioritizing in game initiatives, interests, and desires over out of game ones.

To say that technology influences people's perception of space and time is not a new convention. But with regards to attaching meaning to place and symbolic significance to actions this study showed that a subscription to multiple space time zones makes an individual subject to the context associated with being in an other's time zone rather than one's own. By subscribing to the native time zone of others, PC's synchronized the rhythm of their physical and geographical daily life and the expectations, perceptions, and obligations that take place in their normal hours, with the rhythm, and social expectations associated with it, of time-zone oriented game life. In this way, subscription to multiple time space zones and participation in those zones to include ones out of sync with a PC's own increased the frequency of misinterpreted or misperceived intentions. However, by extending social capabilities over large spatial distance, these same technologies that were sometimes the cause of misinterpretations also facilitated expanded networks, broadened the availability of different experiences and increased exposure to a greater variety of peoples and cultures inside the virtual world. This expansion of social capabilities by technology resulted in a greater diversity of institutions and interests present and intersecting within WoW.

Points of Mediation

Such was the case with WoW. As the incorporation of new technologies provoked the re-imagination of space, place, time, and social networks, it has also increased the opportunity, or point of mediation, where an action was influenced by technology. Every player is exposed or subject to mediation at three such points: the interface, the connection, and the host space. The interface, a computer, is a technological assemblage of parts combined to facilitate an interface between player and space. The quality of those parts influences the degree to which a person can interact with others and graphically display the virtual world. However, not all computers are created equal, as the quality of the part corresponds to effectiveness and is indicative of monetary value. As such, those with better access to resources have access to better computer systems and better graphics and, as previous studies have shown (see Nowak and Biocca 2003: 481; Rheingold 2000; Schroeder 2002), sound and graphics affect presence, which in turn impacts experience. Additionally, as a number of interviews in this study illustrated, the ability to articulate oneself in WoW, whether through communication or action, was affected by the quality of computer used, which in turn impacted not only how a PC perceived themselves but others' perception of them as well.

The second point of mediation is the connection which similarly impacted a PC's sense of presence and social existence in game. However, unlike the computer, there were far fewer options for connections as the world is dominated by a considerably fewer number of internet providers compared to the potential combination of thousands of different computer components. As a result the role of individual agency and a PC's

access to resources was less of a defining factor when conceptualizing the connections influence on experience. Even though internet access requires some financial investment on the part of the player, often in the form of monthly subscription fees, most of the mediation performed in the connection between interface and host occurs outside the player's sphere of influence. A PC's availability of resources and agency help determine which connection the player may invest in, the speed, reliability, and availability with which information is conveyed from computer to WoW and back again is bound to the corporate institution of internet service providers, and largely out of the reach of any players influence. Yet, despite being largely out of the player's control, the connection influences both the player's experience in the space and their ability to pursue their own initiatives, interests and desires, as well as other PC's perception of that player.

The third and most prevalent point of mediation was the host space of WoW itself. In this thesis I spent considerable attention elaborating on the program's logics and grammars and how they, through direct or indirect mediations, lent shape to experience. The structure of the space is doubly significant for its role in facilitating the organization of the technology and connectivity. It organized the diverse pairings of computers and connections and re-presented them all in the space of WoW where all participants were subject to one another's presence, interpretations, and influences. This point of mediation was both a mediating technology and provided the staging ground were itself and other mediations converged and produced the created perceived and consumed experience. The difficulty with this understood in what ways each point of mediation influenced technology's collective shaping of a PC's experience, the expression of intent and the

interpretation of meaning. Especially when technology masked all the physical,

experiential, cultural and situational influences that inform on how a player thinks of,

perceives and articulates meaning in WoW.

Presence

A common thread interwoven throughout these points of mediation was

technology's ability to influence a PC's sense of presence, which had a rippling effect on

the experiences they tried to create, the pursuit of their initiatives, interests, and desires,

their perception of themselves and others, and others' perception of them. The sense of

being in the world, being accessible to others, and the degree that PC's imagined this

displacement and accessibility was central to participation in WoW as a subjective

experience. Through technologically facilitated projection of mass uniformity, WoW

consolidated the subjective input of player agency intermixed with technologies of

interface and connection, and coalesced it into the perception of a shared and, at least by

all appearances, visually and experientially, same experience. This act makes the

platform of WoW an epicenter of consolidated mediation. In order to decipher its

blackboxing as something more than just facilitating an output, where technology's effect

of shaping cannot be distinguished from the intent and interpretation of individual

agency, it became necessary especially from an ethnographic perspective, to understand

the finite number of mechanical avenues of actions and interactions in WoW that were

used to pursue, express, and interpret a multitude of fluctuating and constantly varied

initiatives, interest, and desires.

To articulate this I complied a few general examples. This is not a presentation of new data specific to one example but rather generalized examples of commonly occurring phenomena taken from the aggregate experiences of data collection and placed here to articulate, the subtle and not so subtle, mediation at various points.

Example 1: Connection
Situation: An individual joins the game but, due to remote location, has an unreliable internet connection and cannot participate effectively in any of the group activities. Because of this, person 1 generally only engages with elements of the game that can be done alone; aka. Solo'ing.

Correlation: Because of location, person 1's access to all the features of the game is limited. Their choice of mechanical utility, the elements of the game they use, is similarly limited poor internet connection. Gameplay experience is affected because these limitations relegate person 1 to using 40% of the games overall features. This is done before considering human agency. If the 40% person 1 has access to does not appeal to her wants, that is, if she was specifically looking for a complementing social component, then they may quit the game.

Effect on their experience: Quit the game due to a forced limited experience.

Effect on their perception by others: Person 1's participation went unnoticed because of lack of social mobility.

Example 2: Interface
Situation: An individual joins the game but, due to financial limitations, has a very basic

computer. In order to play the game, person 2 must have the content sent to very low

graphic settings. This makes everything seen on person 2's computer very blurry or

unrefined,

Correlation: Mechanical utility of person 2 limited by their computer setup.

Comparatively, they are not able to experience the world at the level of detail others can.

Effect on their experience: person 2 sense of telepresence is impacted. Because he cannot

see and hear the content, his sense of reality of being in the environment lessened.

Effect on their perception by others: Viewed as unskilled.

Because of person 2's graphics level, they cannot tell the difference between slightly

different locations on the floor in a room, they fail at a task that requires the whole group

to stand at precise points.

Example 3: Host
Situation: Player 1 seeks to console Player 2 for a string of bad fortune in obtaining a rare

item. However, player 2's poor luck was to player 1's gain, as player 1 found the item.

However, the games mechanics only allowed for a specific set of emotes to be used in

game represented in text as /action when typed (e.g. /sit, /laugh, /kiss, /slap, /spit) and

presented as "player 1 hugs player 2" in text. /console, was not an option that was coded

into the game. With the limited tools offered player 1 decided to use /slap contextualized

by the message "sorry" to create the sense of patting player 2 on the back.

Correlation: Game mechanics limited expression, player 1 wanted to use an in-game action to articulate a feeling not supplied by game mechanics and so imagined a different use for existing mechanics.

Effect on their experience: person 2 did not interpret /slap to mean anything other than /slap (i.e. player 1 slaps player 2 across the face), and by that interpretation became upset.

Effect on their perception by others: Person 2 did not imagine the use of /slap in that fashion, and was thus offended. Despite the intent of player 1's action to be one of consolation, it was interpreted by player 2 as poor sportsmanship and gloating.

Why Knowing the Technology is Important

The technological structure of WoW was interpenetrated with a PC's agency and the result was expression limited by the finite mechanical avenues used to express and interpret through a lens of imagination informed by experience, worldview, biology, technology, and immediate situation. Expression in WoW was bound to its mechanics, but its interpretation is understood through the PC's imagination. Such was also the case as an ethnographer, as my own analysis, and other case studies before me) was informed by my knowledge, experience and imagination. Therefore, in order to create a more informed approach to the analysis, an ethnographer pursuing and analysis of WoW or other virtual worlds needs to critically evaluate the mechanics by which PCs are allowed to participate in the space, else run the risk of conflating the mechanical limitations imposed on expression with a limited desire to express oneself.

157

This idea can be supported by revisiting the mechanics outlined in the second chapter contextualized by the data gathered throughout this study. In figure 4 – 4 (page number to be added)in the previous chapter, I catalogued 30 distinct but common and reoccurring motivations I encountered throughout the breath of this research. These motivations did not necessarily occur at separate times; many of these occurred when a PC's priorities or interests shifted. Similarly many of these were found present among different PCs participating in the same collective and collaborative group experience.

An example of this can be taken from Nardi's work in reference to a former Guild member and her letter of resignation (2010). At one time the player's priorities were the pursuit of expertise in the experience of raiding, she later experienced a shift in primacy toward desiring a more social experience. Those interests of performance and content experience that were at one time so dominating were relegated to secondary or tertiary priorities. This example represents a very subtle shift that is difficult to unearth through only participant observation within elements of gameplay itself. Rather, by viewing priorities in WoW, and the social, performative or experiential priorities pursued as in flux, WoW can begin to be conceptualized as a place populated by diverse, shifting, and intersecting meanings.

However, as this research has shown, one person's prioritization was not representative of the entire population in WoW. And only viewing the shifting priorities and meanings of one person's point of view overlooks complex interactions present in games with large scale social and mechanical interaction. Additionally, Shirky argues

that "more is different" and that the complexity of these interactions and intersections cannot be predicted by only studying their constituent parts in isolation (2006: 28). PC's, then, need to be understood both in terms of how their experiences, imaginations, and worldviews inform and direct their initiatives, interests, and desires, how they influence and are influenced by others, and the role technology plays in all its various parts, in shaping those directions of agency.

Here the challenge for ethnographers lies in the ability to discern priority diversity in a group of individuals with both potentially different and potentially similar interests. And whose disparities are masked by the technology that makes them all seem similar. Take for example the impromptu network oriented group interview shown on Figure 5. The interview took place across 3 server types, performing the same activity (i.e. questing), with the same number of group members, which counting myself, totaled 5. In this grouping there were some thematic similarities between the motivations and networks of the respondents and some differences. Yet, the interaction and engagement in the game element of questing created a sense that all our motivations, interests and experiences were in alignment. Yet by looking at their networks it is apparent that these PC's constructed and prioritized their immediate networks differently. Though even their networks combined with motivations explored in the previous chapter only articulated the end result – an example of blackboxing – and were not an indication, either by correlation or causation, of what impact the networks had on the individuals from which the data was gathered. Nor does it explore the possible different influence in-game networks have on a PC over out-of -game networks. An analysis which itself would have to recognize that no

two respondents are going to be exactly the same, nor are their networks (and subsequently their networks influences), and thus players are never equally exposed to network influence or respond to in-game and out-of-game networks the same way. Additionally, all of the motivations articulated by these groups and their networks were only relevant to the immediate circumstance. Would have the responses of the impromptu network group have changed if they were interviewed in the different location in WoW or out of WoW entirely? Some of the repeated exposures to certain respondents suggested as much. The primacy of these priorities could maintain or shift due to expected (such as obligations to a previous commitment that necessitated a shift in priorities from content and completion to social) or exigent (such as power outage, emergency, phone call, or unexpected guest) circumstances.

A second difficulty in is determining how prioritization impacts experience and social negotiations. For example, the respondent Ron was interested in continuing to support his social networks. However his continued participation in the social networks was contingent upon his ability to perform his role in game. Had his fellows subscribed to the same ordering of priorities (i.e. social experience over performance), then Ron would not have perceived that the continuance of part of his social network was contingent upon his in-game performance, making him available to pursue other interests (and other experiences). The key here is that his shifting of priorities was not reflective of his own primary interests and instead a necessary reaction to keep from losing an important section of social life. This social pressure underlying Ron's immediate choice is a

subtlety that thin description would not be able to distinguish from generic or mass participation.

This does not mean that every interest can be symbolically present within every action in WoW; indeed PCs that were interested in social experiences on a larger scale of group interaction (i.e., 6, 10, 20, 30 or more) could not have found such an experience solely within a party, as the technology prohibits group expansion past five members. And individual quests sometimes disallow the use of groups to complete as they are specific experiences to the character and can only be completed alone. In some ways the technologies that make up WoW's mechanics and elements of gameplay can overtly allow for specific experiences. But in other ways the uniformity that WoW provides masks a subtle undercurrent of varied and fluctuating priorities and subjective experience, where different motivations were pursued. It is that possibility, the potential, for interpretative differences to exist and the technologies that enable them that is so important to articulate when researching virtual worlds. Not just to reiterate and perhaps question existing understanding of the composition of the subjective experience but also explore how technology's integration into society has provoked new ways of being with one another, and affected old. While many motivations, experiences, and perceptions may be present, the constant and constantly varied intersections of PC's – individuals that cannot be decoupled from the cultural, experiential, biological, institutional, and social mechanisms that inform on the thoughts they use to think others – whose interactions and interpretations are shaped by technological points of mediation, are what lend depth to WoW and shape it as a site of deep play.

Ethnography and Transparency

One of the primary points that I hope to have elucidated throughout this piece is the need to expand the breadth and depth of studies that aim to critically explore virtual worlds by exposing thin description and analysis and making suggestions as to its augmentation. To do this I drew upon examples from recent case studies published on WoW. However this does not mean that I believed these works to be poorly conceived or executed. Over the course of this research it became clear that one of the many challenges of investigating virtual worlds was a lack of transparency in the published monograph with respect to method and theoretical grounding compared to the visibility required when writing for assessment. It was challenging to compare, contrast or evaluate the methodologies of a monograph like Nardi's My Life as a Night Elf Priest (2010) and other case studies because of anthropologists' tendency to be opaque in the description of their exact methodologies and data collection techniques (Boellstorff 2010, Pierce 2009, Bainbridge 2010, Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008). In contrast, writing for assessment required not only the divulging of methodologies, but the precise articulation of methods, collection process, and analysis so as to evaluate the rigor with which the study was conducted. Therefore, based on both my experience in virtual worlds and training in ethnography, I deduced from the data the breadth and depth of these case studies to establish a precedent of thin description and from there augmented my perception of their processes and analysis to, in my mind, better explore and articulate WoW as a site of deep play.

Reflexivity

One could argue that I was a "native" anthropologist, as I had grown up in the culture of WoW and other such virtual worlds and had the professional experience in programming. These experiences allowed me to better juxtapose the diversity of meaning any experience with the technological counterpart that shaped it and apply these insights to the ethnographic method. However, in addition the strengths of being native, it sometimes meant that I felt personally invested in the research and found it difficult to distance myself in the analysis of the data such that I had to constantly remind myself to probe, question, reevaluate and not take my pre-existing knowledge for granted.

Future research

Over the course of this research and number of interesting ideas have emerged potential expansions to the study or new areas of inquiry. While this study demonstrated that PCs can experience a shift in the prioritization of their initiatives, interests, and desires or a reevaluation of those interests altogether, it did not explore at length any one individual's experience of those shifts. It would be interesting to track the shifts in priorities through a longitudinal study that followed a specific set of PCs and their experiences over the course of days, weeks, months, or even years.

While this study touched on points of mediation from a technological standpoint, data points like the twins revealed the possibility for this concept of mediation to as a process be expanded beyond technology to encompass biological, cultural, and social points of mediation that shaped the articulation and interpretation of agency and meaning-making.

One particular case mentioned previously where a respondent was responsible for his character's behavior even though someone else had been navigating it, caused me wonder how much representative influence and authority digital manifestations carry with them and project outward. It was not further explored in this study because WoW required active participation to be re-presented by a character in the virtual world; inactivity results in a forced logging off of the system. As such this idea of commandeered identity did not occur often. However if a study specifically oriented towards that idea expanded its breath to encompass other forms of digital and virtual presence – from relatively static profiles like Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, active ones like virtual worlds, mostly passive but constantly updated like Twitter and Instagram, and even expanding outwards to other forms of identity like Social Security numbers, credit card, and bank accounts – would likely be better equipped to address the implications of co-opted and commandeered identity.

One way to augment this research would be to apply a network analysis of engaged and previous motivations. Such a perspective could explore the reality of intersecting and fluctuating motivations and determine the extent of their influence, scope of their change within an individual, group, or community.

Lastly, while this study considered technological mediation and agency of technology as representative of how the designer and manufactures intended the technology to be used, it did not look at the investment those designers and manufacturers put into the technology. Investigating this topic could reveal a correlation

between corporate investment in technological mediation, its return on investment, and how different investment foci allude to financial, ideological, institutional yields of change. An investigation into this could broaden understanding of how corporately created spaces like wow shape experience for profit.

An Ending

In this thesis, we have shown that in the virtual world, the agreed-upon norms in any interactive game setting are established by the mechanics underlying the system of meaning that is created by programmers themselves. These meanings are imposed by the logic and grammar of the virtual world's programming. It is within the confines of such programming that a diverse collection of people with their individual perspectives, interpretations, and motivations come to share in particular subtexts of a mechanically defined culture. In the case of WoW (World of Warcraft) its culture comes not only from the narrative that drives the meanings of the in-game symbols, but also from how those meanings unfold parallel to or modified from mechanical predispositions set by programming through the PCs (player characters') creative deployment of language and agency.

Yet despite the pervasive influence of the programming, it is not the only factor that informs the PCs expression of intent and interpretation of meaning. Technology, access, experience, and the pursuit of initiatives, interests and desires also influence how a player interprets the practices of others who are playing and how they express their intentions. Yet anthropological research on such virtual worlds has frequently ignored the power that the underlying technology of both WoW itself and the technological

components of participation and access exercise over the expression and interpretation of meaning for player and researcher alike. The very technological mediation mistakenly leads researchers to view the game's output- the immediate visual and aural experience - as overlying the components of that experience (i.e., various motivations and technologies) without separating them out as discreet contributors to the experience. In aggregating these components, anthropological research on such virtual worlds has resulted in oversimplified analyses. Without recognizing the contributions of the various forces that create this output, anthropological research will continue to struggle to articulate the diversity and depth of experiences that exist inside virtual worlds.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1 Global Theme One – Nature of Digital Existance

Identity is how you perceive the self in the context of the group. Identify with, rather than Identify as.

Identity can be shaped by the needs of the group.

Identity and the self can affect and be affected by needs and desires.

Self is driven to exist in a digital space because of a need or desire.

Self is how a person thinks of themselves when they are alone.

Roles can change as a person's desire for experience changes (create a new character with a different class).

Players engage with various elements to participate in different experiences

Roles can be affected by personal or group or needs and desires.

roles can change as the group dynamic they are apart of changes (especially in size).

An individual's digital existence is driven and sustained by needs and desires, which are born of self, and influenced by (group/collective) identities.

Needs and desires of players are fulfilled through engagement with each other and elements of gameplay.

Need for Acknowledgement: Achievement Completionist Mastery

Desire to communicate

Desire to identify with a group.

Desire to create and/or reinforce relationships.

Desire to have a new experience.

Desire for companionship.

Desire to reinvent the self.

Players continue to play to fulfill wants and needs.

Need for respite: Anonymity, Privacy.

Need to be Needed: Commitment Obligation Responsibility

Need: Addiction, Satisfaction, Gratification, Pleasure.

Need for Comfort and Stability: Habit Routine

167

Appendix 2 Global Theme Two – Social Networks are digital, physical, casual and significant.

Maintenance is required to sustain relationships.

The Significance of each member in a network can vary.

Digital relationships of significance require more effort to maintain.

Technology allows for the creation of large social networks.

Digital relationships are easier to casually maintain

Relationships of significance are more likely to affect a person's drives and desires, than casual relationships.

Personal networks are small because expression, interpretation, in digital spaces are labor intensive.

Rely on others to maintain the casual element of social networks.

Social networks are part digital and part physical, part casual and part significant.

The ability to easily traverse digital and physical boundaries affords the opportunity to reinforce all types of relationships both physically or digitally.

Technology allows the influence of relationships of significance to be everpresent.

Relationships are not bound to digital or physical space.

Relationships created online can be maintained in the physical world.

Relationships created online can be maintained online.

Relationships created in the physical world can be maintained online.

Appendix 3 Global Theme Three – Barriers to Experience

Performance

Recognition

Presence

Communication/ expression

Interpreted and Imagined

Ambiguous barriers as a result of social constructions.

Barriers change the nature of the digital experience, constantly and continuously.

Access (connectivity)

Game elements

Social Elements

Clearly Defined Barriers (built into the structure of the game)

Level requirement

Other perquisite

Group Cooperation

Content

Content barrier by achievement or group participation.

Appendix 4 Global Theme Three – Barriers to Experience: Unblackboxing/a closer look at Connectivity

Appendix 5 Global Theme Four – Expression and Interpretation are Imagined

The way a person understands others is influenced by their worldview.

The way a person chooses to express themselves is influenced by their worldview.

If a person can have many possible meanings and few ways to express then any one act of expression in digital spaces could be the result of any of a number of meanings.

Worldview is the combination of life experiences, personal perspective, cultural exposure, seen through the body.

Imagination, interpretation and expression are influenced by worldview.

A person attempts to understand an action by applying their own worldview to its interpretation.

Experiences are unique and fundamentally different.

The conditions of mediation (access to the space, access to tools, preferences), are unlikely to be duplicated.

The type of experience an individual searches for is guided by their needs and desires.
Which in turn is influenced by worldview.

Worldview is unique to the person.

Expression and Interpretation are Imagined

Equivalent access to tool is not guaranteed.

Technological spaces heavily rely on context.

New ways to express are imagined and improvised through the use of the tools available.

The use of tools, imagined or otherwise convey the expression of intent and the interpretation of meaning

WoW provides structure to the experience of interaction through tools.

Meaning in digital spaces is deciphered on a "best fit" basis. Of the options available, an individual interpreting the expression of another, chooses a "best fit" interpretation of what makes the most sense to them in that situation.

Expression in a digital space can only manifest through the limited options for expression the technology of the space provides.

Tools of expression and interpretation in digital spaces are text, graphic images, situational context, and sound.

A person is more likely to interpret the meaning of something the way it was intended if those involved have interacted with each other outside WoW.

Expression in digital spaces is attempted on a "best fit" basis. Of the modes available, an individual picks the option that most closely represents the intended meaning of the moment.

Tools of imagination are the tools of expression improvised to convey a specific meaning.

171

REFERENCES

Apperley, Thomas H. 2006. Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres. *Simulation and Gaming*. 37(1): 6-23.

Attride-Sterling, Jennifer 2001. Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. 1(3): 385-405. London: SAGE Publications

Auge, M. 1995. Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. London: Verso.

Bainbridge, William Sims. 2010. *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Barnes, J. A. 1954. "Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish." *Human Relations*. 7: 39-58.

Beck, Ulrich. 2000. What is Globalisation? Cambridge: Polity Press.

Boellstorff, Tom; Bonnie Nardi; Celia Pearce; and T. L Taylor,. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2010. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Castells, Manuel. 2009. *The Power of Identity: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture. 2nd Edition,* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Castells, Manuel. 2010. *The Rise of the Network Society.* 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, Manuel, Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, Jack Linchuan Qiu, and Araba Sey. 2006. Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Corneiliussen, Hilde G., and Rettberg. 2008. *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A world of Warcraft Reader.* Cambridge*:* MIT Press.

Crease, R.P. 1993. *Biomedicine in the age of Imaging*. Science 261, 5121: 554

Des Chene, Mary. 1996. Symbolic Anthropology. *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. David Levinson and Melvin Ember eds. Pp. 1274-1278. New York: Henry Holt.

Dumit, Joseph. 2004. *Picturing Personhood: Brain Scans and Biomedical Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dumit, Joseph. 2012. *Drugs for Life: How Pharmaceutical Companies Define Our Health*. Duke University Press.

Durkheim, Emile. 1965. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. New York: The Free Press.

Ferguson, M. 1989. Electronic Media and the Redefining of Space and Time. *In* Public Communication: The New Imperatives. M. Ferguson, ed. Pp 152-172. London: Sage.

Fischer, Michael M.J. *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice*. Duke University Press.

Fischer, Michael M.J., 2005. Technoscientific Infrastructures and Emergent Forms of Life: A Commentary. *American Anthropologist* 107(1): 55-61

Fischer. 2009. *Anthropological Futures*. Duke University Press.

Fischer, Michael M.J., and George Marcus. 1999. 2nd Edition. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences.* University of Chicago Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1990. The Consequences of Modernity. California: Stanford University Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1994. Beyond Left and Right. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.

Green, Sarah, Penny Harvey, and Hannah Knox. 2005. Scales of Place and Networks: An Ethnography of the Imperative to Connect through Information and Communications Technologies. Current Anthropology 46(5):805-818.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. Behavior in public places: Notes on the social organization of gatherings. New York: The Free Press.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1990. Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture. Theory, Culture, and Society 7(2): 237-251.

Harvey, David. 1990. The Condition of Postmodernity. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Harvey, David. 1993. From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity. *In* Mapping the Futures: Local Culture, Global Change. J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, and G. Robertson, eds. Pp 3-29. London: Routledge.

Heeter, Carrie. 1992. Being there: The subjective experience of Presence. Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments 1(2):262–271.

Heidegger, M. 1958. The Question of Being. New York: Twayne Publishers.

Kallinikos, Jannis. 2004. Farewell to Constructivism: Technology and Context-Embedded Action. In: *The Social Study of Information and Communication Technology: Innovation, Actors and Contexts*, edited by Chrisanthi Avgerou, and Claudio Ciborra, and Frank Land, 140-161. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kallinikos. Jannis. 2009. *The Consequences of Information: Institutional Implications of Technological Change*. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Latour, Bruno. 1994. On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy. *Common Knowledge*. 3(2) 29-64.

Latour, Bruno. 1999. *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies*, Harvard University Press.

Lifton, Robert J. 1999. The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation. London: University of Chicago Press.

Marcus, Geroge. 1998. *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Moores, Shaun. 2007. Media and Senses of Place: On Situational and Phenomenological Geographie. London: Media@lse.

Nardi, Bonnie. 2010. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*. Boston*:* MIT Press.

Nowak, Kristen. 2001. Defining and differentiating copresence, social presence and presence as transportation. Paper presented at the Presence Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

Nowak, Kristin and Frank Biocca. 2003. The Effect of the Agency and Anthropomorphism on Users' Sense of Telepresence, Copresence, and Social Presence in Virtual Environments. Presence 12(5):481-494.

Pierce, Celia. 2009. *Communities of play: emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds. Boston:* MIT Press.

Rantanen, T. 1997. The Globalization of Electronic New in the 19th Century. Media, Culture and Society 19(4):605-620.

Relph, E. 1976. Place and Placelessness. London: Pion Limited.

Rheingold, Howard. 2000. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* Cambridge, MIT Press.

Scannell, P. 1996. Radio, Television and Modern Life. A Phenomenological Approach. Oxford: Blackwell.

Shirky, Clay. 2009. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Books.

Schroeder, R. 2002. Social interaction in virtual environments: Key issues, common themes, and a framework for research. *In* The social life of avatars: Presence and interaction in shared virtual environments. R. Schroeder, ed. Pp. 1-18 London: Springer-Verlag.

Steuer, J. 1994. Defining virtual reality: Dimensions determining telepresence. *In* Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality. F. Biocca and M. Levy, eds. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Strathern, Marilyn. 1992. *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge University Press.

Tsatsou, Panayiota. 2009. Reconceptualising 'Time' and 'Space' in the Era of Electronic Media and Communications. Journal of Media and Communication 1:11-32.

Turner, Victor W. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Turkle, Sherry. 2006. "Always-on/Always-on-you: The Tethered Self." Forthcoming In: *Handbook of Mobile Communications and Social Change* edited by James Katz. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Turkle, Sherry. 2005. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

BIOGRAPHY

John P Lunsford graduated from Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, in 2006 where he received a Bachelor of Science in Political Science with a concentration in Technology and War. Since then he has seen employment as first aid and CPR instructor in the Washington DC area, an English teacher in Hubei, China, and most recently spent the last 4 years as a Web developer, graphics designer, application engineer and technical consultant for ManTech and contracted to the Department of Justice. Academically he has held the positions of research intern in the Anthropology Department of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History and graduate researcher during a field school with the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution in Bali, Indonesia. During this time he began and, with the help of this thesis, aims to complete a Master of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in December of 2013.