FRIENDSHIP IN AZEROTH:A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MASSIVELY MULTIPLATER
ONLINE ROLE PLAYING GAME WORLD OF WARCRAFT

by

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Friendship in Azeroth: a Phenomenological Study of Relationships in the Context of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game World of Warcraft

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

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the players of World of Warcraft – particularly those I have personally met and befriended. This research would never have been possible without your contributions and my life would have been much less without your friendship.

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I owe a massive debt of gratitude to everyone who has supported me through the process of this thesis. First, my thesis committee: my readers Patricia Masters and James Witte and especially my thesis director, Mark Jacobs. Thank you to all of you for your support and work – particularly during the final semester. Second, the entire sociology department at George Mason University: Many of you counseled and advised me throughout my time there, and a special thanks needs to be extended to Amy Best and Nancy Hanrahan. Third my family: My parents (Steve and Leslie), my sister (Abby). Finally, I'd like to thank my husband Randy. More than anyone he's been there through everything and unconditionally provided me with support.

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ABSTRACT

FRIENDSHIP IN AZEROTH:A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MASSIVELY MULTIPLATER ONLINE ROLE PLAYING GAME WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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As the world moves further into the 21st century more and more of our social activities take place online. Of particular interest is the social space of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) where the interaction of participants is mediated both in terms of interacting through a computer and a game. The question arises of how relationships in this environment are formed, progress, are impacted by the social norms of the game culture and what significance they have in the lives of those who participate in them. This study aims to address this question from a phenomenological perspective focusing particularly on the perception of reality and how that mediates the relationships involved. The data was gathered several years in an ethnography on a World of Warcraft server via participant observation. The study ultimately concluded that while both the presence of a computer and a game mediated the relationships that they eventually progressed to more 'intense' (if volatile) relationships in which the actual lives of the players seeps into the virtual-world.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Fantasy Gaming is a social world, luxurious in imagination

and filled with mysterious delights. [...] [Y]et, unlike these

constructions of our sleeping mind, these worlds are not

experienced in a state of reverie or unconsciousness. These

worlds are experienced collectively-- they are shared

fantasies. This shared component raises issues not present

in private fantasies [...]. (Fine 2002 p. 72)

As humanity moves into the second decade of a new millennium new

technologies abound. It is a revolution of information technologies, with as deep an

impact upon society as a whole as the industrial revolution which early sociologists

observed. One interesting product of this revolution is the birth of "virtual worlds". They

exist in many forms – while some are created simply to exist as a virtual world (for

example, Second Life) many others are games, often of the sort known widely as

MMORPGs -- Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games. In MMORPGs

players take part in fantasy games wherein they interact with the virtual world and

creatures that inhabit it in the form of created characters that manifest as player-avatars.

In terms of gameplay and game design the majority of these games have their roots in

tabletop fantasy role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons.

Gary Alan Fine (2002), in his book *Shared Fantasies* outlines how a rich social community has arisen around the playing of tabletop fantasy role playing games. He establishes how an understanding of these games and how they are played may provide insight into how human beings construct reality and fantasy. Many of his observations are relevant in terms of MMORPGs. However, the fact that the games are set within a three dimensional manifested virtual world changes the social dynamic of the game considerably. No longer is it a face-to-face interaction of a half-a-dozen players and a game referee constructing fantasies with a pen, paper, and perhaps some miniature figurines. Instead it is thousands upon thousands of players participating in an online three dimensional space, exploring locations, modifying their avatars, and doing battle with creatures controlled by artificial intelligence without the direct intervention of any non-player human being.

Within *Shared Fantasies* Fine(2002) briefly explored the implications of understanding the experience of players within traditional table top role playing games. In one particular chapter he builds upon Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* in order to perform a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of players within tabletop RPGs. While some of the experiences that Fine describes are still relevant in the realm of MMORPGs (such as the relationship between player and character) within the context of MMORPGs several key portions of the experience change. In addition to the practical

divisions of virtual worlds vs. actual worlds[1] which of course impact immersion, the facts

that players are more distanced from the creators of the game, that the virtual world is

available on an almost constant basis at almost every hour of the day or night, and that

the appearance of the world is manifested in three dimensions on the computer screen

work together to create the semblance of a real and distinct space separate from the

paramount reality of every-day life but also more 'tangible' than traditional realms of

fantasy. This, of course, complicates the frames that players build up around the games

considerably, particularly in terms of trying to define for themselves where the 'real'

world ends and the 'in game' world begins. Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* still

however appears to be applicable in trying to comprehend how the players are

negotiating the phenomenological experience of games within virtual worlds. Thus, this

project will attempt to use and build upon Goffman's *Frame Analysis* as the basis of its

analysis of the understanding of players of their interactions within MMORPGs.

1Boellstorff (2008) defined the virtual and the actual thusly: the virtual is that "which approaches the actual without actually arriving there." (p.19). The implications then are that the actual world is the tangible world of every day life, and virtual worlds are those which approach the actual world without actually quite becoming the actual. These terms specifically avoid reference to reality as that would imply that interactions taking place in a virtual space are less real than interactions that occur within an actual space.

Within the context of this project the exact definition of actual vs virtual is extremely problematic due to its focus on the phenomenological experiences of the players participating within the game. With this in mind the terms actual and virtual will be used in a way very similar to Boellstorff, to refer to the practical split of the digital game world from the non-digital tangible world outside of the players' perceptions of that split. That is, the actual world will refer to the naturally manifesting space that houses the paramount reality of every day life described by Schutz (1970). The actual world is accessed through the senses of the human body with no additional equipment barring that which corrects existent biological senses (e.g. eyeglasses). Virtual worlds will refer to man-made spaces that simulate the actual world to whatever degree and require special tools (e.g. computers) to both generate and access them. As such, virtual worlds require the actual world in order to exist.

It should also be noted that in discussing players' understanding of this split that the actual and virtual may be discussed using the language that the players themselves use (e.g. 'real life' vs 'in game'). The language of actual and virtual will be used specifically to refer, inasmuch as is possible, to the objective differences between the 'space' that the MMORPGs take place in and the tangible world that players can experience through their un-aided biological senses.

Of course, before analysis of frames and frame-switching may take place (that is, the framing of the people being interacted with via the game) a structure of the reality that frames the interactions must be discussed. Without this description of structure the meaning of the interactions – and the consequences of them which may impact the relationships being undergone – may be lost. Within the description the altering of frames, and the impact upon and of relationships constructed in game should be readily apparent.

For this description this analysis will be building upon the model established by Alfred Schutz (1970) in his essay "Transcendence and Multiple Realities". In his essay Schutz establishes a framework for the formation of paramount reality and the nested existence of other subordinate realities. While the essay takes a somewhat simplistic stance on play (in particular isolating it from work in a way that is almost impossible to maintain when observing the play of adults) the overall structure in terms of what is being observed here is the same. The reality of the world of the game is dependent on paramount reality to exist – though, the under-workings of the game (the code, the machines it runs on) exist on a frame (to borrow Goffman's term) that may not be considered part of paramount reality. That is, the average player playing the game is not going to be considering these underpinnings when structuring the reality around the game any more than a person using a lightswitch is going to understand or consider the reality of the complex system of wiring and circuits that makes the lightswitch work. Paramount reality consists of an action being performed (the lightswitch is moved in position, the

icon for the game is selected on a computer screen) and there being a response (the light comes on, the game boots up). Whatever mechanisms cause this to occur are outside of the perception of the normal player – though, particularly when a malfunction takes place, if considered actively by said player the fact that they exist may be acknowledged.

Thus, the primary system of understanding regarding the game is basically two-tiered. The first tier is the paramount reality understanding of the game as a game (in that, it is a game occurring in a game world according to game rules). The second is the game within itself, that is, the meaning of the rules and structures within the game both as a world (e.g. how gravity works within the game) and as a society (e.g. what society has been constructed within this game world by both the game makers and players). The analysis of this understanding will be particularly Schutzian in nature – a description of a society that has grown from an existing society and interacts with it frequently even though it is sometimes perceived as being separate by those who participate in it.

The dichotomous understanding of the world that the game takes place in transforms MMORPGs into a unique space for social interaction; players interact with the world through the vehicle of an avatar, and with each other through a variety of means – via text chats and voice-chats in addition to the aforementioned avatars. This interaction might take place within a variety of frames. Examples of these might include: players addressing each other with their actual-world names and discussing actual-world issues; players choosing instead to interact using only virtual-world names and discussing the elements of the game; role playing, where players dive even deeper into realms of

fantasy and adopting a persona for their avatar based in the 'lore' (invented history and culture) of the game world. These encounters can brutally highlight questions concerning the reality of the interactions, i.e. things such as: 'How real are the other players?', 'How real are my own interactions and relationships with these other players?'. These questions are further complicated by the frequent shifting of frames: 'I got a new staff' vs. 'my character got a new staff' for example.

What muddies the waters of interaction considerably is that both computers (introducing the actual vs. virtual dichotomy) and play (introducing a fantasy world vs. real world dichotomy) mediate the interactions that are occurring, requiring a wide variety of frames and frequent frame-switching. As such, three points of tensions appear to develop. The first is actual world relationships: the sets of obligations, duties and commitments players have to other people outside of both the game and the virtual worlds. The second is virtual world relationships: the set of obligations, duties, and commitments players have to people within the context of the virtual world, but not necessarily within the game. The third is play-relationships: the sets of obligations, duties, and commitments players have both to other players and the game itself within the game. All three of these sets of relationships provide those participating within them with rewards and all three relationships simultaneously place demands on the player. What then becomes problematic is that the demands placed on the player can often come into conflict leading to tension that the player must then resolve by prioritizing the sets of relationships.

The general order of priority that appears to be given is that actual world relationships trump virtual world relationships trump play-relationships. This is the idea regularly put forth by the community. Several things rapidly become problematic about this. The first is that relationships are sometimes hard to categorize. For instance, consider an individual met within the confines of the game, but, who one comes to interact with considerably outside of the game itself, discussing topics that are often not the game, perhaps one even encounters them in the actual world. At what points does that individual transition from being a play friend to virtual world friend to an actual world friend? Where do they fall within the categorization of relationship priorities?

The second thing to become problematic is while relationships and community are given explicit priority over play-activities by the individuals playing the game, one of the main reasons human beings play games is to have fun. To explain, individuals come to the act of play with the explicit wish of exiting the reality of everyday life and immersing themselves in the world of play. It is through this apartness that reality may be reconstructed in such a way that individuals may more easily have fun than they would within the paramount reality. Ergo, though it is claimed almost universally within the communities surrounding these games that relationships – particularly actual world relationships – trump the play activity and the quest for fun, in actuality the desire for a fun experience is one of the things leading individuals to play these games in the first place. If the games become no-longer fun due to efforts to satisfy the demands of both virtual world and actual world relationships then they lose their original purpose and

often some degree of the benefit they were providing to those playing them. This suggests a tension between the need for the separation of worlds that is inherent in play and the desire for a community between players that extends beyond the game world, effectively uniting the two worlds.

A puzzle emerges : though a clear system of priorities is put forth by the community, and is confirmed in concept by most players, the actuality of the situation is quite different. Relationships are difficult to categorize, and even when they are categorizable they can be difficult to prioritize. In terms of the players' perceptions boundaries between play and not-play as well as virtual and actual are in constant flux. How then are players negotiating these boundaries and coping with these tensions? How are they defining the reality of their interactions? Where are the players themselves drawing the line between the virtual world and the actual world? To what extent is this differentiating their perceptions of reality concerning the game and their interactions therein? That is, in sum, how are the frame changes brought on by the fact that the interactions are taking place in both a game and a virtual world impacting the players' understanding of each other, and how is that understanding shaping the amount of importance they place on relationships?

CHAPTER 2: MECHANICS AND INHERENT STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD OF
WARCRAFT VIRTUAL WORLD

At this point it becomes apparent that a brief discussion of the structure of the

virtual world will be needed. World of Warcraft is a virtual world that was from its

inception designed to be a game, and thus, the mechanics of play are integrated into the

very structure of the world. In order to understand the basic nature and content of the

interactions within that world an attempt will be made to outline the mechanics of

connecting to and participating in the game, and then to give a very brief summary of

mechanics-supported social structures within the game.

The game of World of Warcraft may only be played on computers. The player

installs a "client side" version of the program on their computer. This "client side"

program contacts another program on another computer (at the headquarters of the

company that makes the game) known as a "server". A player may only play the game as

long as the "client" and "server" computers/programs are in communication. A

disconnect between the two will cause a player to be bounced out of the game/world and

to a screen where they log in.

After installing the game in order to be allowed to connect to the world the player

first needs an account with Blizzard. The account is registered under a private username

(an email address). At any time the player wishes the account may also be assigned an alias – this is so when players add each other to account-specific friends-lists in the game they may choose whether the account alias or the actual-world name associated with the account will be visible to other players.

After creating an account (a one time activity) a player must log in to the game. Once they are logged in they may select which "realm" they wish to go to. In the context of World of Warcraft a "realm" is a series of servers tied together that are a unique version of the virutal world. "Realms" are assigned to one of several categories based on the rules that will be integrated into them. A player-versus-environment or "PvE" realm is a realm that emphasizes players fighting the game's AI either on a solo basis or cooperatively. A player-versus-player or "PvP" realm allows players to attack each other while they are out in the world if they are in opposing factions. A role playing or "RP" realm is a realm where supposedly players who enjoy role playing are welcomed. RP realms come in both PvE and PvP varieties. While there are typically communities of role players on these realms that do not exist on other realms the bulk of players on these realms choose to ignore the role playing aspect and simply play the game as they would on a realm that is only PvE or PvP.

Also of note is a technology Blizzard has implemented in the past few years that allows similar realms to engage in "cross realm" activities. In some cases this has been used to effectively fuse two or more realms on a permanent basis. In other cases it is simply used to allow players from a wide base of realms to engage in group play together

in specific parts of the game.

After a player has selected a realm they must select a faction. Currently in the game there are two factions: the "Horde" and the "Alliance". Each faction has a series of in game cities and lands affiliated with it specifically, as well as a series of in game "races" associated with it. Choosing a faction will determine several things for a player: 1) what "race" their character may be 2) what players they may interact with on the server with that character and 3) where in the game their character will start. It is worth noting that faction selection is done on a character-by-character basis. So while character A on a server may be placed in one faction character B on that server may be placed in the other if one so wishes.

After selecting faction players then select a character's "race". The "race" one selects is not race as it is understood in society at large. Instead one chooses which one of several species of creatures one will be playing (e.g. human, dwarf, orc, goblin etc). The race of one's character determines the character appearance (though one is able to customize this within limits) and where specifically the character will begin within their faction's lands.

Once a character is created a player may engage in any number of activities. There are several however that are of particular interest to this paper. The first of these is the ability to join a "guild". A guild is a group of players that, via game mechanics, share certain resources – a guild-only chat channel, a guild bank where items may be stored for guild usage, a logo, the ability to see a list of who is in the guild and who is online, and a

number of other functions. A guild may be loosely compared to a sports team in that often guilds will take on game challenges together.

Another activity of note are the various chats throughout and surrounding the game. The game itself comes with a variety of text chats in various levels of public and private use. In addition to these chats players may easily create new chat channels that other players may join. Several realms have de-facto player created public chat channels that may be used for sub communities within the realm.

Voice chats are used commonly in the game. The ones used most commonly (Ventrillo, Teamspeak, Skype etc.) are not integrated directly into the game but are outside programs brought in by players to facilitate playing. There is a voice-chat function within the game but it is widely regarded to function poorly and is generally not used.

Finally a player may engage in a number of in-game challenges in which they use their character's abilities to do battle either in raids, instances, arenas or battlegrounds. Raids and instances are very similar – they are portions of the game world sealed off with a portal. Player groups of certain sizes (5-man for instances and 10-man-up-to-30-man groups for raids) may enter through the portal (or via one of the various methods the game has to transport one to such locations). Each time a group enters through the portal it creates a new "instance" of the instance/raid that only those players can access. This is to allow players ample time to coordinate for the difficult battles therein without other players interfering. Being able to raid well, with a dedicated group that regularly

successfully completes a difficult raid, is considered the height of PvE.

Battlegrounds are PvP. They can contain anything from 10-players-per-side to 40-players-per-side with 2 sides. Objectives vary from each battleground but have much in common with classical games that involve capturing points on a map (e.g. king of the hill, capture the flag etc.). Much like instances/raids they are instanced – so only the players in that particular version of the battleground may participate.

Arenas are very similar to battlegrounds, though, a much smaller group of players participate. Arenas are 2v2, 3v3, and 5v5. In order to participate in the ranked arena system players must join a team to do so. Arenas go until one team has all their members "die".

It should be noted that in World of Warcraft while death of one's character is a punishment it is not permanent. One is required an investment of time and attention to bring one's character back to life and one's character's armor takes damage. Death of a character is considered an inconvenient setback but is not the end of that character.

This is simply a brief discussion of mechanics to provide some background for the material that is to come. The game is a surprisingly complex and vibrant virtual world and there are many details of its construction (both of the world and the game integrated into it) that are not covered in this summary.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This study was composed mainly of participant observation occurring on a single realm within the MMORPG of World of Warcraft, and within the 'instances' and 'battlegrounds' and 'zones' that occur cross-server. For this study a variety of characters of varying races, classes, and genders, as well as at a variety of levels within the game were used. These characters will be progressed through the game at varying paces.

On the primary realm on which the study took place, a variety of text chats integrated into the game were watched/participated in depending on the character (in terms of location or guild membership), including the public chats, (available to all players within a zone or city), semi-public guild chats (available to all members within a guild), and private chats such as whispers/tells (messages sent directly to my character that only the player of that character could see). The text chats within 'instances' and 'battlegrounds' were also watched/participated in. Additionally the researcher actively played the game, sometimes with no formal conversation occurring but observing the actions of players around her.

Similarly, some voice-chats were observed. As the guild the researcher primarily played with was not heavily voice-chat oriented. While voice chats were participated in occasionally they did not happen often enough to merit being recorded/transcribed and

were simply treated like any other conversation observed.

The bulk of the information was recorded via traditional ethnographic means. However, this ethnography is an insider ethnography. On top of the time spent in the field by the researcher during the research period delineated for this thesis she had many years of experience within the game internalized to draw upon. No specific events mentioned during this thesis came from a period outside of the research period, but, it would obviously be impossible for the researcher to systematically wipe all memories of the decade of participation in this community. Thus, some of the broad statements made in the research come from this bank of knowledge.

Supplemental information was gathered from sources outside the game itself in terms of blogs, YouTube videos, forums, online comics, etc. as the need for it became apparent. The game maintains an active community and a great deal of discussion about the game occurs outside of it on various websites. In order to fully participate in the game's community this portion of the interaction was not neglected and portions of the research come from analysis of this content.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH

The Presentation (and Reflection) of Self in World Of Warcraft

Before a discussion of relationship formation as an additional mediation of reality may begin several important norms within the game regarding self-identity must be explored. As becomes quickly clear these norms are crucial for the structure of interactions that occur widely within the game that lead to relationship development and the 'realness' of other players as human beings. The first impression you make of a player is based on the name and appearance of the avatar they have selected for themselves. The second piece of information encountered is the role the player has chosen to take in the game. The third piece of information that is eventually encountered is a combination of the player's ability to play the game and self confidence in their ability to play. All three of these provide a framework upon which initial relationships are built and explored.

The first area in which reality mediation may be noted in the context of World of Warcraft is the way one chooses to present one's identity within the game. As has been noted in the covering of mechanics a player upon joining the game for the first time is required to make a number of decisions on how to present oneself. You create a character, choosing their "race", their gender (which, of course, does not have to match up to your own gender) and one selects a name for that particular character.

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Typically characters/avatars are considered to be separate entities by players – a popular name for them is "toons". Players typically have a variety of toons of varying races (and sometimes genders) that they play. The primary character played is known as a "main" and alternative characters are called "alts". While each character has a unique name players are typically referred to by friends made in-game by their "main" character's name or nickname.

While the "toon" is considered a separate entity from the player (particularly since most players have multiple toons) that entity is taken as a reflection back on the player. For example, two players in my guild GG and KGL often teased each other over GG playing a "gnome" character or being a "gnome". KGL often playfully pretended to dislike gnomes and GG would in turn act like her selection of a gnome for her toon was done specifically to spite KGL. GG also frequently referred to herself as a gnome in chat, always in a joking or playful manner, but subsequently blurring the lines between player and character. In the context of multiple layers of play it becomes obvious that frame shifting occurs rapidly and frequently in terms of identifying with one's toon or toons.[2]

Some players select certain features or characteristics for their characters based on ideas concerning their physical appearance in the actual world. Broadly these players may be broken into two groups whom shall be called "projectors" and "aspirants" for the

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2 Bainbridge (2007) notes that a player's avatars/characters are often treated as possessions and are not closely related to the self. However, Golub (2010) shows at least one example where players are using 'I' language to refer to a character's behavior (e.g. I am casting the spell). While these findings may seem initially contradictory happily incorporating frame theory resolves the situation. When deeply immersed in the game (and thus acting in one frame) players are more likely to use 'I' language and to associate themselves with their avatar. When less immersed (and acting in another frame) the avatar becomes a possession – albeit, one that is used to express and present the self.

purposes of this paper. "Projectors" attempt inasmuch as is possible to create characters with similar physical builds to themselves in the actual world. Certain fantasy races are often associated with certain sets of physical features (for example, the gnomes in the game are all given button noses, whereas trolls are given relatively large and often hooked noses). Players may select a race with physical features similar to their own and then feel a kinship with that fantasy race. See the previous example of the "gnome". GG appears to have modeled her character at least partially on herself and to feel a kinship with the race.

Aspirants create characters based on traits they wished they had in the actual world. This may be fantastical traits (having a tail, purple skin, glowing eyes etc.) or more mundane traits that are broadly desired in the actual world (being tall, being lithe, being muscular, etc.). Aspirational characters are toons that allow a person to, in the form of the game, live out a fantasy of having these desirable traits. It may be argued that because of the limited options given in character creation, and the highly exaggerated and idealized version of the human form that is inherent in the design of the characters (particularly female characters) that all characters in the game must be at least somewhat aspirational.

It must be noted that these two categories are not all encompassing. Some characters/toons are created out of a strict sense of aesthetics, or because a player appreciates the abilities or story that are unique to a specific fantasy race. They are also not mutually exclusive categories – some players may have a majority of toons that are

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"aspirations" but also have one "projection" toon designed to look like them. Projection and aspiration may occasionally both be represented within the same toon – e.g. by creating a character of a purely fantastical race such as the one that resembles minotaurs, but then giving the character features one observes in oneself.

One thing of particular note in using one's character as an avatar/representation of one's self is the use of gender. Many male players create female toons. A crude, if widespread joke, among players who do this goes something to the effect 'Well, if I'm going to be looking at the backside of a character all day I'd rather it be a woman's!'.

Because of this phenomenon all players are generally assumed by the player base to be male until otherwise stated even if they have a female avatar and/or a feminine sounding character name. This is in spite of the fact that women make up a significant portion of the player base (The Neilsen Company, 2008). Conversely occasionally female players will create male toons. Often though, a female player creating a male toon is doing so to hide her gender in order to avoid harassment. Thus, male players with female characters are often perfectly open about being male whereas female players with male characters are usually far more cagey regarding their gender. Frequently this comes to a head in one of two circumstances. The first is a player long believed to be the default 'male' logs onto a voice-chat and speaks. This may cause a great deal of surprise depending on how long the player's gender has been assumed. The second is the one I saw far more frequently in the game: the aforementioned harassment.

I will be brief in my discussion here. It is widely accepted among most gaming

communities that women are disproportionately harassed. While obviously this is ripe for study in the context of gender and masculine-oriented spaces it would be too lengthy for the purposes of this study and would derail the subject. I will confine myself to one widespread example I have observed on the upswing in late research.

A popular "game" in general chat, played by a variety of individuals colloquially known as 'trolls' (based on the Internet slang – no relation to the current group of trolls), is to make a claim to the effect that 'Women do not play World of Warcraft'. When women, or men, speak up contradicting this they are told they are lying, and to send pictures as 'proof' (sometimes the request specifies obscene pictures). Without 'proof' these players continue to assert over, and over, that no women play. As the "game" continues as more people speak up more trolls join in claiming that they're lying that any women whatsoever play World of Warcraft. Other players will express that they are sick of seeing general chat clogged up with these messages and will admonish the people challenging the trolls to stop "feeding the trolls" (e.g. giving the trolls attention). Unfortunately, this has an additional silencing effect on players who wish to challenge the bad behavior of the trolls.

The point of this game, as far as can be concluded in this study, is to create the illusion that there are no female players, or that female players are rare and to discourage women from speaking up. The effect is one of frustration (expressed publicly – often in the chats both men and women will express this emotion with the trolls) and privately of isolation. At one point I spoke out against these trolls and was contacted by a female

player thanking me for standing up to them. She was upset about the frequency with which this "game" kept occurring in general chat and that there seemed to be no effective way to stop it.

In this environment it is hardly surprising that players will hide gender (as well as other marginalized statuses occasionally[3]). While unpersonalized harassment (such as the 'no women play World of Warcraft' "game") is relatively common, more personalized harassment is more rare. Nevertheless as World of Warcraft is viewed as play, and thus, an activity for relaxation, most players will take steps to ensure they are not harassed through careful presentation of the self. This is particularly important in the designing of avatars as by necessity the avatar will provide the most information about the self in the situations where one may not know the other players well enough to know if they would

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3At this point I must briefly mention the extent to which harassment occurs. Personal harassment for race is uncommon as that is 'easy' to hide. At least one of the players I encountered (whose name I will specifically avoid mentioning out of respect) was quite diligent about keeping their racial identification private. It was only made apparent to me after another player who had covertly been shown a photo of them and then later told me about it. I confirmed it with the player in question some months later. It should be noted that even though this player was very diligent about not mentioning their race, topics of race are not an uncommon subject in the game. A kind of broader harassment takes place in what may be termed 'racist' pejoratives being used by a number of players in a variety of public chats – but most commonly the trade-chat used as a general chat. Often political discussions will come up and will be taken over by individuals with extreme viewpoints, some of which are not afraid of using this language which in the overarching western Internet culture is generally construed as being offensive.

A similar situation for LGBTQ players exists. At least one player I encountered was transgender and was not shy about this fact. I do not know how much they were or were not harassed, but I do know many players were taken aback by them upon hearing their voice. I myself left a guild due to players in the guild's chat using 'gay' as a pejorative repeatedly. I finally told them I myself was bisexual and found their language very offensive and left. Another player I was friends with (who later left themselves over the incident) told me that their behavior afterwards was to frame me as overly sensitive and emotional.

These issues are brought up not to frame the community negatively, but to help illustrate that a certain amount of covering goes into place for players with marginalized statuses across the board. The more difficult a status is to cover (e.g. gender) the more open players typically are about it, and the higher the rates of personalized harassment are. Nevertheless, much like the player who carefully covered their race, some players will go to special lengths to avoid harassment – including not using voice chat, or claiming they do not have a microphone on joining a voice-chat.

harass over a status or not.

Beyond the use of the toon/avatar to represent oneself in-game another thing that players will draw initial impressions from is the class a given character is. Each class is capable of filling at least one of three roles: absorbing damage from enemies (also known as 'tanking'), damaging (also known as DPSing), and healing. Some classes can be specialized into sub classes that fill different roles (e.g. one type of "paladin" is a healing subclass while another is of a tanking subclass).

Depending on the role one chooses to cover certain assumptions will be made by the player base at large. Stereotypes elaborated on here are drawn from a number of conversations – often occurring in general chat. "Tanks" are seen as leaders, since within groups of players going out to battle computer-controlled characters in the game's environ they set the default pace for the group. "Tanking" is generally seen as masculine and the role is treated with great importance. However some players stereotype the bulk of tanks as prima-donna types who have had their importance go to their head . A frequent event in small groups of players taking on challenges is a tank not paying attention to the pacing of the group and running ahead of it. The tank draws the enemies but since the rest of the group was dealing with something else, or is simply not prepared the group "wipes" (i.e. all of the players are killed by enemies and must restart and take penalties to armor quality etc.). This can lead to arguments in the group. The ensuing arguments – typically caused by situations like the one described, or very similar generally are the topic of complaints about tanks, in public spaces which lead to players confirming their

belief in the stereotype.

"Healers" are seen as being much more feminine and are famed for being the first blamed by groups when things go wrong. After the tank has made their call on how an encounter should be treated decisions in the group typically are designed to facilitate the healer. Healers are stereotyped as being sensitive and liable to become easily upset. "DPSers" are generally seen as the members of the group with the least responsibility and the least say in how encounters in the game get addressed. These players who deal damage are also often seen as the players with the least investment in a given team. Damaging is often considered the easiest role (regardless of the actual difficulty) and is stereotyped to have attracted the least mature players.

Where the stereotypes for healers and DPS usually play out within the game is directly within groups. Large groups in particular seem to be prone to evaluating healers and DPS with great scrutiny (in these situations the job of a tank is usually clearly defined and it is very easy to see if they are doing it improperly and the pacing of the group is determined more equitably). Generally, when a large group (such as a raid) encounters difficulties in their performance the blame initially falls on the healers in the group. Usually after this blame the healers will be carefully evaluated and often swiftly removed from the group if found to be inadequate. If the healers are found to be performing adequately the DPS are then evaluated. This can lead to elaborate conversations about removing them from the group and if they deserve to stay or not. As groups of this size typically only have two tanks, a few healers, and then a minimum of

half of the remaining group consisting of DPS (often more!) the job of DPS is more divided up and it is harder to pinpoint where the weak link in a team might be. Though the stereotypes don't get discussed here there is an undercurrent of players trying to manage "irresponsible" DPS and "delicate/emotional" healers.

Outside of the game stereotypes of various roles may be found in a variety of places. For the purposes of illustration the webcomic Looking For Group (Sohmer & de Souza[4]) will be discussed here. While Looking For Group is not explicitly about World of Warcraft (presumably for legal reasons) it is a thinly veiled parody of the game. Many stereotypes about player classes occur in this comic – for example, one of the characters is a warlock (in World of Warcraft a DPS class) who is a male character shown to be irresponsible, chaotic, and seemingly is defined by an unhinged id. The other DPS class shown (a hunter) has a naive, childish, somewhat innocent view of the world. The healing class (a priest) is represented by a female main character. She is emotional, sarcastic, and sharp-tongued. The 'tank' character is the strong, silent, heroic type who sets the pace of the group (on page 16 (Sohmer & deSouza) he actually tells other characters to 'pick up the pace'). While this comic is not officially affiliated with Blizzard/World of Warcraft it has been embraced by the fanbase and the connection is widely acknowledged – and it provides a clear example of some of the stereotypes that exist in regards to a player's role choice.

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4   As a special note – proper protocol for citing webcomics does not seem to be yet developed in the ASA style in which this paper is structured. As such, the author elected not to include a particular date with the citation as the comic has been produced in an ongoing fashion (even though it is one large work to be taken as a whole) from 2006-2015.

Finally in terms of the initial mediation of reality in the game there is another relationship between the game and the self. The activities in the game themselves feed back into the ego of the person playing. Because this interaction with the game is so fundamental to the playing of the game it is impossible to separate out the "actual self" and "virtual self" in this case. To explain: When one is playing the game one's performance in the game will reflect back on one's ego and sense of self-confidence. As this is a social game a player's status as a 'good player' or 'bad player' of the game is constantly being assessed both by the community and the individual.

Being a "good player" is treated by the community as blanket permission to critique "bad players" in whatever way the "good player" seems fit. This critique often takes the form of vicious insults and acerbic comments which are all treated as justified by the bulk of the community so long as they are being directed at a player who is "bad" at playing the game and are regarding their "bad" performance.

Sometimes the performance in the game being critiqued is legitimately poor performance, but other times performance that would be seen as acceptable is harshly judged because the player in question has been a poor sport. For example, in one pick-up raid attended after multiple attempts taking down a difficult enemy several players left the raid, some of them with angry comments. The remaining players commented that we were better off without them with variations of 'they weren't that good anyway' given in varying degrees of insulting language. One player in particular kept comparing the people who left to various derogatory terms for women ('little girl', 'bitch' etc.). The performance

of the players who had left had been mediocre, but, not to the extent that they were made out to be – poor sportsmanship was treated as if it were a decrease in performance at the game (in terms of the game's mechanics) as opposed to unwanted behavior.

Since evaluation of performance is used as a metric to judge not only one's ability to play the game, but is also used in reference to one's personal quality of character players tend to be very defensive in their ability to play the game. One article encountered online involved a player discussing how emotional it was to undergo a series of trials (Proving Grounds or "PG") put in the game used to evaluate one's skill at a certain role (tanking, DPS, healing, etc.):

> This post is going to be a bit of a meander through my
>
> experiences, more emotional than informational: PGs were
>
> not just an in-game diversion for me, but a deeply personal
>
> challenge; a battle against not just NPC AI and RNG, but
>
> also my own struggles with depression, low self-
>
> confidence, and biased self-perception. I can't divorce
>
> these things from the overall experience, so I might as well
>
> talk about them. Being open about it has helped me before,
>
> and if any of my readers are unfortunate enough to suffer
>
> the same issues, I'd like to think that I can help.
>
> (Healiocentric, 2014) [5]

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5   AI = Artificial Intelligence. RNG = Randomly Generated Numbers (used to determine the effectiveness of some portions of gameplay).

Identity Cultivation and Privacy

The previous section highlighted the ways in which one may control the presentation of self in World of Warcraft, particularly concerning the use of in-game norms to structure one's identity. All players who first encounter each other within the game regardless of the depth of relationships they may eventually form are, at least initially, governed by the systems described in the previous section.

However as relationships grow deeper players seem to become more "real" to one another. The more one encounters another player the more aspects of their "actual world" life will seep into the game allowing a picture to be painted of them beyond just the initial choices they have made regarding their character.

There are several ways that one's actual-world identity may "seep" into the game and the ways players choose to control (or not control) that seeping of information. Instead of there being distinct categories or styles of player privacy the desire for privacy is more of a spectrum along which one may fluctuate as relationships develop. For the sake of this paper however the cases of players that tend towards high privacy interactions (High Privacy Players or HPPs) and players that tend towards low privacy interactions (Low Privacy Players or LPPs) will be focused on.

It should be noted that most players do not gravitate to the far ends of the spectrum. During my time researching very few Low Privacy Players were encountered. High Privacy Players were more common but still rare. Most players fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum usually leaning a bit to one side or the other in the bulk of

their interactions.

High Privacy Players are players that work to keep their virtual and actual world activities separate. HPPs keep the amount of information regarding their actual world lives tightly under control in casual relationships as well as in established in game friendships. Typically an HPP must establish a firm friendship where they "get to know" someone over months or years before beginning to release personal information. Even then it may come at a slow trickle depending on levels of trust.

HPPs are usually very good at managing what information about them comes out when in the case of casual relationships and brief encounters. True privacy for HPPs is very difficult when it comes to long-term relationships however. Often friends from the actual world will come into the game and want to play with them and will let information slip. One HPP after commenting that I'd overheard their name in a chat explained "I don't like it when they use my name. But it would be weird for me to be like 'HEY DUDE call me Batman!'. So I usually just ignore it and hope it slips by". Other information about an HPP may come in the form of reasons for leaving a group (e.g. I need to go pick up [family member], I need to go care for [child], my [pet] needs attention), background noises in group chat (e.g. spouse or parent calling for them), or in reasons for playing at odd times or in odd ways (e.g. the weather is forcing them to disconnect often, or they are snowed in and can't attend a job).

Generally HPPs do not feed false information however. Their goal appears not to be to create a new identity online, but simply to keep their actual-world identity separate

from their virtual-world identity. Often HPPs fear harassment by other players for various actual-world statuses (discussed earlier – see footnote 3), are shy, or are simply living in a situation they dislike and want to forget about when they play the game. Joblessness, dropping out of school, discussions of pasts that involved unpleasant elements were all subjects that came up at various times during the game. Sometimes it's not even particularly dire circumstances a player wants to forget about – at one point KGL admitted to keeping a discussion going in-game to avoid doing schoolwork for college. The focus was turned repeatedly back to the game, and in game chats, to help 'blot out' the real world necessity of schoolwork.

Low Privacy Players show very little concern about how much of their actual world lives are revealed. Typically they will withhold some information in casual relationships (phone number, addresses, full names etc.) but are fairly relaxed as relationships intensify. It is not uncommon for them to request to add other people to their social media. Sometimes when a player is sharing information about their actual life it can make other players uncomfortable, but LPPs rarely become uncomfortable with this 'over sharing'. Instead LPPs will simply continue on the conversation. For example, after being missing from the game for two weeks I explained to the guild I was in that I had been ill. When I brought up the nature of my illness most of the individuals within the guild became strangely quiet and seemingly reluctant to chat. However, one LPP in the guild typed out a cheerful message that "It's just a natural process" and the discussion moved on.

In general LPPs appear to play heavily for social reasons (though a number of them may be quite concerned with the game itself). They also will sometimes log on briefly simply to talk with friends and not to play at all. HPPs in contrast often (at least ostensibly) are in the game to play it for its own sake. However most of them build and maintain friendships – some of which are very robust. More often though HPPs like talking about general topics rather than specific. Some HPPs will avoid discussion of actual world topics (especially controversial ones) while other HPPs seem to view the game as their own personal debate club. For example, one player, KGL, frequently would log on briefly to check in-game systems but wouldn't speak to other players (even friends) while briefly on. At other times KGL would log on for long stretches where he would just join a public chat to have long debates with other players – often strangers. Depth of relationship and quality of discussion seem very important to most HPP players, while LPPs in general appear to be pleased with a variety of discussion topics (some frivolous some not).

Of course whenever the subject of player identity is discussed the question of 'what about people who pretend to be someone they're not' comes up. People who try and fabricate identities whole-cloth are very, very rare. The vast majority of players are open to various degrees about their lives depending on how intense the relationship they have with another player is. Somewhat counter-intuitively the very small amount of people who do attempt to fabricate identities whole-cloth generally initially appear as LPPs. They freely share made up information about their actual world identities, sometimes

becoming braggadocios about it. It is very difficult over long periods of time to maintain false information however. Much as for HPPs truthful information from the actual world will occasionally creep in, but in addition to that there is the maintenance of an ever growing web of lies that will not add up.

Much more common than someone earnestly faking an identity are people who jokingly assume an identity briefly (claiming to be someone they are obviously not – e.g. a celebrity, the President, the Devil etc.), or simply a friend logging on to another friend's account to play a prank (either on the owner of the account or on that person's friends). Occasionally there appeared to be individuals who would conveniently claim to have a certain identity whenever a topic of debate regarding that identity came up in a public chat. Often though these individuals are greeted with skepticism by the player base at large.

Tensions and the Boundary Between Actual and Virtual

As noted by Chen (2008), stress runs high in the situations constructed by the game. Depending on if one engages in these challenges with friends or with strangers the management of these stressors will vary and players' behaviors towards their comrades will be strikingly different.

This paper proposes that a significant factor in the treatment of other players is linked to how 'real' players perceive each other to be. Thus two groups facing the same set of challenges – a dedicated raiding group vs. a 'pick up' group will behave enormously

differently. In the example of the dedicated raid group vs. the 'pick up group' we find a microcosm of the dichotomy that occurs throughout the entire game.

That is, in groups where relationships are enduring (occurring over a significant period of time), meaningful (players feel connection and empathy for one other) and strong players are more likely to view each other as 'real' people and in general treat each other with manners, norms, and behaviors given to people they encounter in the actual world. Generally this indicates 'better' treatment overall, but, when these relationships do resolve the results are often quite volatile.

However when relationships are brief (occurring over an insignificant amount of time (a few minutes to a few days), not meaningful (players know nothing about each other except for what information the game provides by default and whatever can be gleaned from their limited interaction) and weak players are less likely to treat players with manners, norms, and behaviors afforded to individuals they encounter in the actual world. This means that interactions are generally more limited (less chatting occurs and less personal information is exchanged), behavior that would be considered 'rude' in the actual world is common, and people will often leave the group at a moment's notice. There is generally very little commitment to these groups or the people therein.

The dedicated raiding group vs. the pick up group makes a very good example of this. In a dedicated raiding group the players are well known to each other and are presumably friends. The expectation going in is typically success. As Chen (2008) notes in these groups success or failure is not defined in terms of actual game mechanics of

success or failure but rather by a social understanding of what had happened that night. In these groups 'blame' is often dealt with carefully and there is an attempt to spread responsibility for failures throughout the group. Often the raid ends when the players either successfully complete it or decide as a group to terminate the attempt for the day. Typically these players will try again at the raid at some point in the future. This is not always the case – but generally when a dedicated raiding group collapses it either slowly "fades out" as the players lose interest over a period of weeks or it collapses suddenly in a fit of furiously heated arguments.

A pick-up group's interpretation of success or failure is completely different. Often players will have radically different bars set for what constitutes a successful attempt and what constitutes a failure. Frequently there are a number of players in any pick up group with no patience for failure who will leave the group (sometimes after expressing their anger to other players) at the first failure a group encounters. Relationships are weak and brief and easily severed. Tensions run high and players often speak to each other in ways that would be considered disrespectful out of the game. Many players feel defensive about their abilities as players (since, as noted before, player ability is linked heavily to self worth), and other players, frustrated with the apparent inability of the group to function, are happy to point proverbial fingers in terms of blame. These groups are tiring for many players and "PuGs" as pick-up-groups are commonly called are frequently derided among the community.

It isn't just in the game's constructed encounters that tensions run high. There are

many opportunities for conflict within the game. From raids, to player-versus-player activities, to chats where hot button issues are being discussed, to the minutia of relationships that occur in any long standing group there are ample places where the famed "drama" may arise.

"Drama" is one of the primary forces that appears to drive the division of players' lives into "actual" and "virtual". One player,TCP, refused by and large to run any group content because of previous conflicts they had experienced. Instead they played solo content in the game while using the various chats to socialize. TCP was also an HPP conscientiously protecting details about their actual world life. While the two facets of behavior were never explicitly linked by TCP this seems to be a common variety of HPPs. The game is where they go to relax and thus A) conflict must be avoided (do not bring actual world conflicts into the virtual world) and B) situations in game that also lead to conflict must be avoided.

Drama drives another type of HPP as well. KGL who, as mentioned, frequently enjoys arguing in the public chats appears to maintain his privacy in part to avoid harassment outside of the game. While the type of HPP that TCP is, is primarily interested in keeping the boundaries high between actual and virtual in order for conflict not to spill over from the actual world, the type of HPP that KGL is keeps those boundaries high to keep the conflict from the virtual world from spilling over into the actual.

The tensions that come about during play have further consequences besides

drama. As players become more 'real' to each other and the barriers between the virtual and actual world break down in relationships tension becomes more high stakes. These higher stakes lead to less predictable behaviors and outcomes and more intense "drama".

When tension does occur within groups built on strong relationships it is often defused quickly or it quickly becomes extremely volatile in nature. In a strong-relationship group it does not matter in what frame a point of conflict originates. If the tension from the conflict is not defused the conflict will quickly be elevated to the frame of 'this is an actual person that I know who is treating me inappropriately.'. When tension is defused quickly the frame rarely shifts – if the tension was over an in-game mishap it stays about the in game mishap, if it was over a discussion of something from the actual world the results stay in the context of opinions on the actual world, having no bearing on the players continuing to play together.

When tension is not defused quickly the results are often unpredictable. Sometimes individuals will be able to remain friends – KGL got into a conflict with GG's brother-in-law (BIL) at one point. BIL left the guild in a fury and still maintains a strong dislike for KGL, as does KGL for BIL. However GG and KGL have remained solid friends and continue to play the game together. Other times sudden conflicts that occur in a game-frame can blow up dramatically and can sever friendships on all frame levels. The fallout from these conflicts can sometimes be spectacular. Entire webs of apparently strong friendship can be destroyed in a night – sometimes with the dissolution of in-game guilds and a a catastrophic amount of hurt feelings. This type of conflict is rare but

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happens often enough to be a known phenomenon in game.

The reality of the other players makes the dissolution of the relationships formed even more painful. When a weak-relationship group breaks down there may be momentary upset among the members of that group. However when a strong-relationship group breaks down the consequences can be on par with the dissolution of strong friendships that first formed in the actual world. "Drama" becomes widespread with rumors and hearsay proliferating. Occasionally these conflicts may eventually be resolved, but the fall out from them is nevertheless considerable.

A Note on "Trolling"

In this analysis it would be remiss to skip a brief mention of trolling. For the purposes of this paper "trolling" will be described as: a behavior or set of behaviors designed specifically to get an adverse reaction out of another person ostensibly for the amusement or pleasure of the individual trolling.[6] Trolling may be taken part in by an individual, or it may be taken part in by a group of individuals. Trolling may be harmless and silly, or it may be extremely provocative taking on overtones that would be commonly called 'racist', 'sexist', 'homophobic' etc.

KGL, who as it has been previously noted tends to treat the public chats of the game like a debate club, is widely known on the realm as a 'troll'. His behavior, however, is generally not inflammatory in the sense of being derogatory to any one group. Instead,

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6   The etymology of the word 'troll' in the context of an Internet rabble-rouser significantly predates World of Warcraft. It bears no relation to the fantasy "race" in World of Warcraft named trolls.

rather like someone in a debate club he will pick a position (even if he does not agree with it) and will argue it for as long as he can. Several members of the guild who are good friends (MD, BLC, KZH) with KGL are well aware of this behavior and try to avoid arguments with him.

Occasionally KGL will take absurd stances or make absurd claims about himself specifically to argue them for his own amusement. While a mostly harmless form of trolling it has earned him the ire of a large portion of the realm. Of interest though is his reputation for behavior outside of the public chats and debates – he is known as a 'good player' and often players who have been around the realm for years will bring this up in his defense.

The reason for their ire seems initially confusing. KGL's trolling is not generally inflammatory in nature. Players can leave the public chats whenever they wish remaining in private and semi-private chats. The ire of the population at large though can be explained when we view 'trolling' as a regulating behavior.

At this point we must return to the troll "game" discussed earlier of 'no women play World of Warcraft'. As was hinted at earlier when a troll is doing this beyond simply engaging in broad spectrum harassment for its own sake the troll is attempting to regulate the presence of women within the game. That is when a troll claims 'no women play World of Warcraft' and leads anyone who replies down a dizzying argument trail they are doing several things. The first is that they are telling any women watching the public chat they they are unique and alone. The second is they are telling any players watching the

public chats who are not women that any women they know are unique oddities. The third is that by persistently arguing their point, refusing to take the word of women that they are women and demanding "proof" (usually in the form of nude pictures), they are erasing women's voices from the game. Even if they convince no one that no women are playing the game they teach women that the next time they instigate this variety of trolling not to speak up and identify themselves. They are regulating women and establishing boundaries that hold World of Warcraft as a supposedly male only space (the existence of people of other genders is never considered by these trolls in their arguing).

Trolling may be used to regulate any number of subjects and to attempt to enforce any number of realities via social consciousness. Of particular interest here though is the use of trolling to regulate the barriers constructed between the virtual and the actual. In this sense trolling is done, broadly, to convey to players of the game that the game is not "real life" and is in actuality separate from the actual world as is evidenced by the seeming acceptance of the trolling.

A strong example of the trolling-as-regulation is the Serenity Now Funeral Crashing. In this event several years ago on the Illidan realm a group of players (primarily from the guild 'Serenity Now') decided to 'troll' a funeral being held in game. The funeral was for a person in a guild who had passed away in the actual world. The members of her guild were mourning her and had posted a notice on a website dedicated to the Illidan realm noting the location of the funeral and inviting those that had known the deceased to attend. They specifically asked other players not to interrupt the funeral.

Illidan is a player-versus-player realm where players from opposing factions may attack each other in most areas of the game. Serenity Now was on the opposing faction from most of the attendees at the funeral. The attendees avatars were also not dressed for battle (they were wearing the in-game version of tuxedos etc.). The Serenity Now players easily defeated the funeral attendees and then remained in the area until the funeral attendees had gotten their armor and driven them away. Serenity Now then took a video recording they had done of the whole incident and uploaded it to YouTube. This is where the controversy exploded on a community-wide level.[7] (*YouTube - Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral* 2010)

Where it becomes obvious that this is an act of regulation is in the comments on the various versions of the video on YouTube. They present a conflict. One side is constituted of individuals who feel that crashing a funeral for someone who died in the actual world is inappropriate even if that funeral is held in a virtual world. The other side appears to be composed of individuals who think the first group is taking the game too seriously and that it is a game and that the Serenity Now players were playing it as intended.

In this case the act of trolling serves to regulate a firm barrier between the actual and the virtual world. This barrier is resisted by some (those who feel the crashing was inappropriate) and supported by others. What is supposedly at risk is the sanctity of the game as a 'world apart' from the actual world where players may act in a way that they

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7   At the time of this paper the most viewed version of the video on YouTube had over 6 million views and 36 thousand comments. See the URL in the references section for current statistics.

wouldn't in the actual world. A blurring of lines between the actual world and the virtual

world means having to admit that one is playing with actual (and therefore more 'real')

people and that one must treat them according to the norms one obeys in the actual world.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The most prominent conclusion that this study has come to is that actual-world identity and virtual-world identity do impact each other. Confidence, relationships, and emotional consequences of the game/play do spill over outside of the game and play in a variety of ways: an individual's competence at playing the game impacts self esteem, friendships that may last years are formed playing the game (players frequently share personal information including phone numbers, Facebook pages, Skype IDs, personal location etc. in an effort to foster their friendship within the game – which ultimately of course leads to it coming 'out' of the game). While players do attempt to isolate the self they are very rarely successful at it and even for chronic "world isolators" they have to take a rather lackadaisical approach to it (where "leaked" information is ignored or dismissed or brushed off with a joke) to maintain any boundaries long term.

Furthermore, the relationships formed are meaningful, and the designation between a virtual-world relationship and an actual-world relationship is arbitrary and is often done by individuals attempting to isolate a portion of their life they believe would be detrimental from the other portion. Some examples include: Female players hiding that they are female in order to avoid harassment, players of color never mentioning their

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race in order to avoid conflicts on that, people who like to use the game as an outlet to harass others trying to keep their in-game activities isolated from their actual-world identities, people who believe that others knowing that they play a game in their free time would have them branded as 'childish' etc. However, while the designation between actual-world and virtual-world relationships is widespread (in the practice, for example, of calling actual-world existence 'real life' and prioritizing 'real life' relationships), it is certainly not typically used to restrict. During the time of this study at least one player I know MMS entered into a romantic relationship with another player which they subsequently have happily carried on outside of the game and in actual-world space.

At this point I would like to discuss the following research as a follow up to this research: 1) Analysis of impacts on virtual-world relationships as a solution to the "bowling alone" problem. That is, virtual-worlds are becoming one of the significant social spaces of our time where otherwise isolated individuals can go for social interaction. This is of course riddled with its own unique challenges associated with the game having a physical diaspora for players in actual world terms (that is if the players want to meet up outside of the game distance is often a concern). Is the shift of significant spaces from actual to virtual spaces helpful or harmful? Does it decrease anomie?

2) An analysis of the impact on gender on the game's social structure. "Gaming" as a community at large is in a period of upheaval. Gender in many areas of gaming that were traditionally overwhelmingly male is becoming more equal – that is, women are showing up in numbers that would be expected in an egalitarian situation given the

numbers in the general population. However during my experience researching gaming (at least in World of Warcraft) is not, in fact, egalitarian. Far from it. In my time doing research behavior towards women has transitioned from that of a general masculine environment where occasional incidences of hostility occurred (and there was a lot of pressure to be "one of the boys") to an environment where individuals in the spirit of "trolling" are outright denying and erasing the presence of women as a "joke". Since these individuals perceive the presence of 'too many' women around they are resorting to treating women as isolated incidences. The entire population for female players is being systematically denied by rabble rousers – on the surface it's done just to create tension for the amusement of the "trolling" individuals – but there seem to be deeper implications of trying to make women feel unique in their presence providing an artificially isolating effect.

Additionally there seems to be a culture of masculine norms – e.g. it's fine to yell at and harass someone as long as they are 'bad' at playing the game – that is coming into conflict with a population that is less tolerant of masculine norms being used to excuse harassing behavior.

Inasmuch as it has been shown that the relationships within the game, and the activity within the game, have significant crossover between the actual and virtual world a followup study more narrowly focusing on the gendered aspects of the community and the conflicts that are generated from such would be prudent.

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